

# Austin Independent School District 2014 Family Leaver Survey

## Introduction

*Leavers* are students who were served by the district during the prior school year and who did not enroll the following fall, or students who left during the school year. When parents in Texas withdraw their children from public schools, districts are required to document the official reason for withdrawal, as defined by the state, for children in grades 7 through 12. Although the documentation process and assignment of a leave code provide some information about why students are withdrawn, many of the categories are too broad to inform district administrators about the personal, discretionary choices families make when students change schools.

To address this limitation in the available leaver data, during the summer of 2014, the Department of Research and Evaluation surveyed families who had withdrawn their children from AISD during the 2013–2014 school year. The purpose of the survey was to identify the most common causes for withdrawal, to identify the schools to which former AISD students transferred, and to collect information that would inform district staff so they can better address any concerns that may have prompted families to withdraw their children from AISD.

## Survey Method

Using the best available information from student data systems and Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) records, 6,545 students were identified that had withdrawn during the 2013-2014 school year, coded with one of the leave reasons listed in the box at right. Of this group, 2,239 students had a family/primary contact with an email address on file with the district. An invitation to participate in the survey was emailed to the families in the sample in July, 2104. Two hundred sixty-one of the invitations were returned as undeliverable; the final sample was 1,978.

The survey was available for approximately 6 weeks, and multiple reminders were sent to eligible families to increase the number of responses. Ten percent ( $n = 199$ ) of families responded to the survey. Ninety-seven percent responded in English, and 3% in Spanish. A comparison of the grade level and ethnicity of the respondents and of the email and leaver samples is presented in Table 1. The composition of the respondents was different from that of the email and leaver samples in several ways. First, the proportion of responses from families of high school leavers was lower than the proportion of high school leavers in the leaver and email samples. Second, White families were overrepresented in the respondent group, as compared with their representation within the leaver and email samples. And third, Hispanic families were underrepresented in the respondent group, as compared with their representation within the email

Included leave codes
Home school
Private school in Texas
Public school in Texas
Charter school in Texas
School outside of Texas
Return to home country
Other (dropout)
GED in Texas
Examples of excluded codes
Died
GED outside of Texas
CPS removal
Incarcerated
Etc.

and leaver samples.

**Table 1. Ethnicity and Grade Level of Leaver Sample, Email Sample, and Children of Survey Respondents**

		Leaver sample (n = 6,545)	Email sample (n = 1,978)	Survey respondents (n = 199)
Grade level	Elementary	41% <sup>a</sup>	33% <sup>a</sup>	38%
	Middle	18%	18%	23%
	High	41% <sup>a</sup>	42% <sup>b</sup>	33% <sup>ab</sup>
	Children at multiple levels	—	7%	6%
Ethnicity	White	18% <sup>a</sup>	30% <sup>b</sup>	51% <sup>ab</sup>
	Hispanic	61% <sup>a</sup>	47% <sup>b</sup>	29% <sup>ab</sup>
	Asian	4%	6%	9%
	Black or African American	14% <sup>a</sup>	12%	7% <sup>a</sup>
	American Indian or Alaska Native	<1%	<1%	<1%
	Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	<1%	<1%	<1%
	Two or more races	3%	4%	<1%
	Children with different ethnic codes	—	2%	2%

Source. AISD Student Records; AISD Leaver Survey

Note. Statistically meaningful differences are indicated within level using the same superscript.

## Data Analysis

The survey included three questions: (a) What were your reasons for leaving AISD? (b) Where did your child (or children) go after leaving AISD? (c) What could AISD do to improve services to families like yours in the future? Responses were expected to vary somewhat according to school level; therefore, survey responses were downloaded and merged with the original sample file so school level could be included in the analyses.

**Coding.** The responses to each item were reviewed by a researcher, who coded them into *categories* with similar responses using qualitative data analysis software. The coded responses were then grouped with similar responses into broader *themes*. For example, categories such as “class sizes too large,” “disagreement with student behavior management,” and “felt school was unsafe” were grouped under the theme, “Dissatisfaction with school environment and/or policies.” Summaries and examples for each question are reported in the following sections, and examples of quotes from the respondents are included.

## Results

### *What reasons did parents give for withdrawing their child(ren) from AISD schools?*

One hundred and sixty-five respondents provided an answer to the question "What were your reasons for leaving AISD?" This was an open-ended, essay-style question; therefore, respondents could give more than one reason. A detailed list of the coded categories and themes for this item and the percentage of respondents who provided each type of response can be found in Table 2.

### *Key finding: Many families were dissatisfied with the learning environment and/or school policies.*

The largest percentage of responses by theme fell under "dissatisfaction with school environment/policies" (62% overall). Dissatisfaction with school was somewhat less common for high school parents (49%) than for elementary (73%) or middle school parents (73%). Categories under this theme ranged from "unhealthy food options" to "general dissatisfaction with the school." The most common category in this theme was that a child was "bullied or treated poorly by other students." In particular, 32% of respondents with middle school children cited bullying or poor treatment as one reason for withdrawing their child(ren) from school. One parent wrote:

Both of my children (then 10th and 7th grade) were treated poorly by other students. It was an extremely unwelcoming environment and [HIGH SCHOOL] and [MIDDLE SCHOOL]. The counselor at the middle school at least tried to help but the counselor at the high school told me that, "new students are typically not very welcome here"...(by other students). [The counselor] actually advised me to try another school within the district or to try another district.

Another parent wrote:

Even though the principal, teachers, programs, etc... were exceptional at [MIDDLE SCHOOL], my child was getting badly bullied on a day-to-day basis. The principal had no real solutions to the problem. In fact, it seemed that the school was in denial there was a problem. My child was just one of many getting bullied at that school. It's a shame, considering how incredibly caring the staff and teachers were. The kids were really hateful at that school, and it seemed there was no way around that.

Another common response in this category was general dissatisfaction with the school environment.

For example, one parent wrote:

My 10 year old son was a great student, had an A average and 4's for behavior. He was miserable and dreaded school. He is active and could hardly stand being in such a subdued controlled environment all day. If he had some freedom during the day to play he probably would have been fine. But free play has been replaced with directed play.

Other parents said they wanted alternative experiences for their children. As one parent put it:

[The school was] not meeting my child's needs. He doesn't respond well to sitting in desks and doing worksheets all day. The Montessori option makes more sense to me (at least for my child's personality). He's thriving and squealing with delight when I pick him up after school. [ELEMENTARY SCHOOL] left him feeling like a factory worker. So sad.

Table 2. Summary: “What were your reasons for leaving AISD?”

	All (n = 165)	Elementary (n = 62)	Middle (n = 41)	High (n = 53)	Multiple levels (n = 9)
<b>Dissatisfaction with school environment/policies</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>78%</b>
Bullying/poor treatment by students	12%	6%	32%	2%	11%
General dissatisfaction with school	11%	16%	5%	8%	22%
Class sizes too large	7%	15%	—	6%	—
Disagreement with student behavior management	6%	6%	10%	4%	—
Felt school was unsafe	6%	2%	5%	6%	44%
Not enough down time for students	6%	15%	—	—	—
School lacked necessary resources	3%	2%	5%	4%	—
Student "lost in the cracks"	2%	—	5%	4%	—
Wanted different/alternative experience for child	2%	3%	—	4%	—
General disagreement with school policies	3%	2%	5%	2%	—
Dislike school neighborhood/school in new neighborhood	2%	3%	2%	—	—
Negative peer influence	1%	—	2%	2%	—
Lack of diversity at school	1%	2%	—	9%	—
Sibling transfers were not approved	1%	2%	—	—	—
Unhealthy food options	1%	—	2%	—	—
<b>Family or student move</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>37%</b>	<b>28%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Moved out of district or state	34%	37%	29%	23%	100%
Returned to home country	4%	8%	—	2%	11%
Moved due to cost of living in Austin too high	2%	2%	—	2%	22%
Child moved due to custody changed	2%	—	5%	2%	—
Distance to magnet was too far	1%	—	2%	—	—
<b>Dissatisfaction with support from school/staff</b>	<b>43%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>26%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Adults didn't support child	10%	11%	7%	9%	22%
Bad experience with school administration	8%	11%	10%	4%	—
Lack of support for learning disability	7%	10%	—	4%	44%
Staff unresponsive when asking for help	7%	11%	2%	4%	11%
Special education needs weren't met	5%	8%	5%	4%	—
Unhappy with child's teacher(s)	5%	8%	—	2%	44%
<b>Student health</b>	<b>13%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>17%</b>	<b>—</b>
Mental health issues that school couldn't manage	6%	5%	7%	8%	—
Health issues that school couldn't manage or made it impossible to continue	5%	2%	10%	8%	—
School-related stress/anxiety	2%	—	5%	2%	—
<b>Unhappy with testing</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>33%</b>
Too much emphasis on test prep	7%	8%	4%	2%	33%
Too much testing	2%	3%	2%	2%	—
Testing culture is too stressful for my child	1%	—	2%	—	—

Source. AISD Leaver Survey

Table 2. Summary: “What were your reasons for leaving AISD?” —continued

	All (n = 165)	Elementary (n = 62)	Middle (n = 41)	High (n = 53)	Multiple levels (n = 9)
<b>Other</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>25%</b>	<b>—</b>
Dropped out	5%	—	—	12%	—
Student too far behind to catch up/could not pass	3%	—	—	10%	—
Tested out	1%	—	—	2%	—
Personal reasons not related to school	1%	2%	—	2%	—
<b>Dissatisfaction with academics</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>—</b>
Felt child was receiving a low quality education	5%	3%	2%	—	—
Rigorous curriculum overwhelming	2%	2%	—	4%	—

Source. AISD Leaver Survey

**Key finding: Many families left AISD because of a family move.**

Among all of the individual response categories, the single most common reason given for leaving AISD was that the family moved out of district or the state (34%). In addition, categories within the theme “family or student move,” were cited by 43% of respondents. Examples of other categories of responses in this theme included that a custodial change caused the child(ren) to leave AISD to live with a different parent, the family returned to their home country after a temporary stay in Austin (often work-related), and the cost of living in Austin was too high to remain.

**Key finding: Some parents felt that the school staff did not support their family.**

The theme “dissatisfaction with support from school/staff” was particularly common among elementary parents (60%). Examples of categories within this theme include, “bad experience with school administration,” “lack of support for learning disability,” and “staff unresponsive when asking for help.” Some parents wrote about their frustration trying to connect with school staff about their child. Parents provided examples of phone calls and emails that were never returned or administrators and teachers who were never available. Others felt that the school staff were not interested in their child’s well-being. Examples include:

Teachers were prejudicial towards him. Counselors were unsupportive. This all made his adapting to a new school rather difficult.

It did not feel as if teachers were interested in helping in his adjustment.

We did not feel the staff had an interest in his well being or success.

(my child's teacher) needed to be reminded of my daughters ADHD (although medicated) and to not keep sticking her in the back of the class.... We finally went to the administration because of her and I was never able to even get a meeting with the principal and had to be referred to the Vice Principal. [THE TEACHER] even admitted in our meeting with her and the Vice Principal that she "didn't have time to know about all these things that kids have nowadays like ADHD and dyslexia!" My daughter doesn't

have dyslexia....”

In addition, parents stated that the school was unresponsive when asked for help. For example:

My child was borderline failing, When we asked for help and additional tutoring there was none made available. The school had no accurate way of reporting his attendance as the system in place could be much improved and real time. He managed to bring his grades up the last 6 weeks in the new school. I couldn't even get a timely call back from the staff at [HIGH SCHOOL], let alone actual specific help. When my child would act out in frustration there, then we would get lots of negative attention, when if he got positive attention, the negative wouldn't even have happened. These are my honest thoughts and opinions.

Had a terrible experience with our teacher, [REDACTED]. My child was crying everyday after school and calling himself dumb. Kept asking the teacher for accommodations and we communicated but nothing was really being done in the classroom. The last communication was that we could no longer talk to her and to only talk to the principal. Our child has been diagnosed Severe Dyslexic that we tested for ourselves, no one at [ELEMENTARY SCHOOL] ever thought to test him. He was diagnosed in the 3rd grade and at that time [ELEMENTARY SCHOOL] didn't have CALT on staff. We also had to go for private therapy and work with AISD through his 504. But as I told you no matter what you check on the 504, it all depends if the teacher will implement the actions. I wish to this day that [REDACTED] be denied any child that has a learning disability because she is not educated enough to be their teacher.

Lack of follow through staff Told no or lack of funding for tutoring or assistance Requested behavior specialist... Told the teacher wasn't the problem Had to make 24 hour notice to visit classroom.. still seems fishy to me.

AISD did absolutely nothing to support my son or me when he got involved with marihuana. You kick these kids to the curb and offer absolutely no support or counseling. The problem began AT SCHOOL. How sad that that a child stands no chance to get back on their feet.

**Key finding: Parents perceive that their student’s health, wellness, and/or special education needs are not always met.**

Several parents wrote about withdrawing their student from AISD schools because the school was unable to meet their child’s needs. One parent wrote about making a choice to withdraw her child from AISD to better accommodate the medical treatments necessary to manage a chronic illness:

I do not feel he is ready for kindergarten and I do not want him to repeat the year. At [SCHOOL], he has a half day of school which allows me time to perform his breathing treatments for cystic fibrosis.

Another parent experienced a lack of support for her child’s special needs:

They said they had no way to educate my daughter - her anxiety, her fears, her high functioning autism, her emotional disturbances had prevented her from being able to handle the classroom, even the Special Ed Classroom and although we looked at Homebound services, they told me that those services were for children with short term illnesses that were going to return to class shortly. They felt they had no other options, I was scared about getting in trouble for truancy, and so with no choices of how to help my daughter, I felt encouraged to withdraw her.

In addition to management of health and special education needs, some families wrote about health issues that arose as a result of a poor fit between their child and the school, and in some cases, lack of support from the school for improving conditions for their child:

My child was having anxiety issues and was missing a lot of school because of it. Some of her issues included the high school population being overwhelmingly large. The school administration was not supportive..

My son was having severe social/school anxiety and was refusing to attend school. I was working with the counselor, assistant principal, and social work specialist to try and get him back into school. The social work specialist recommended that we ease him back into school gradually but the assistant principal said that was absolutely not an option. She said he either came the entire day or not at all. I ended up withdrawing him and enrolling him at [residential treatment center] where he had therapy sessions in the morning and attended a [SCHOOL] in the afternoon.

*Key finding: Concerns about academic rigor and/or the amount and type of testing were mentioned, but not frequently.*

Concerns about the learning environment and the support of school staff were cited much more frequently than concerns about academic rigor and testing. Parents who responded with concerns about academic rigor and testing often mentioned “too many worksheets” as an example of the way in which preparation for testing manifested in their child’s school:

[MIDDLE SCHOOL] was 100% STAAR based teaching. A worksheet nightmare, poor instruction.

The constant push to cram the STAAR testing strategies down these kids' throats is not helping. Too many worksheets.

Too much focus on repetition and rote memorization. Too much pressure put on kids to do well on STAAR. My son's love of learning went rapidly down the toilet. Avalanche of ridiculous repetitive worksheets/homework that focused solely on STAAR test results. You all can say you don't teach to the test but that is simply untrue. All the benchmarks and school work revolves solely around the content of these tests.

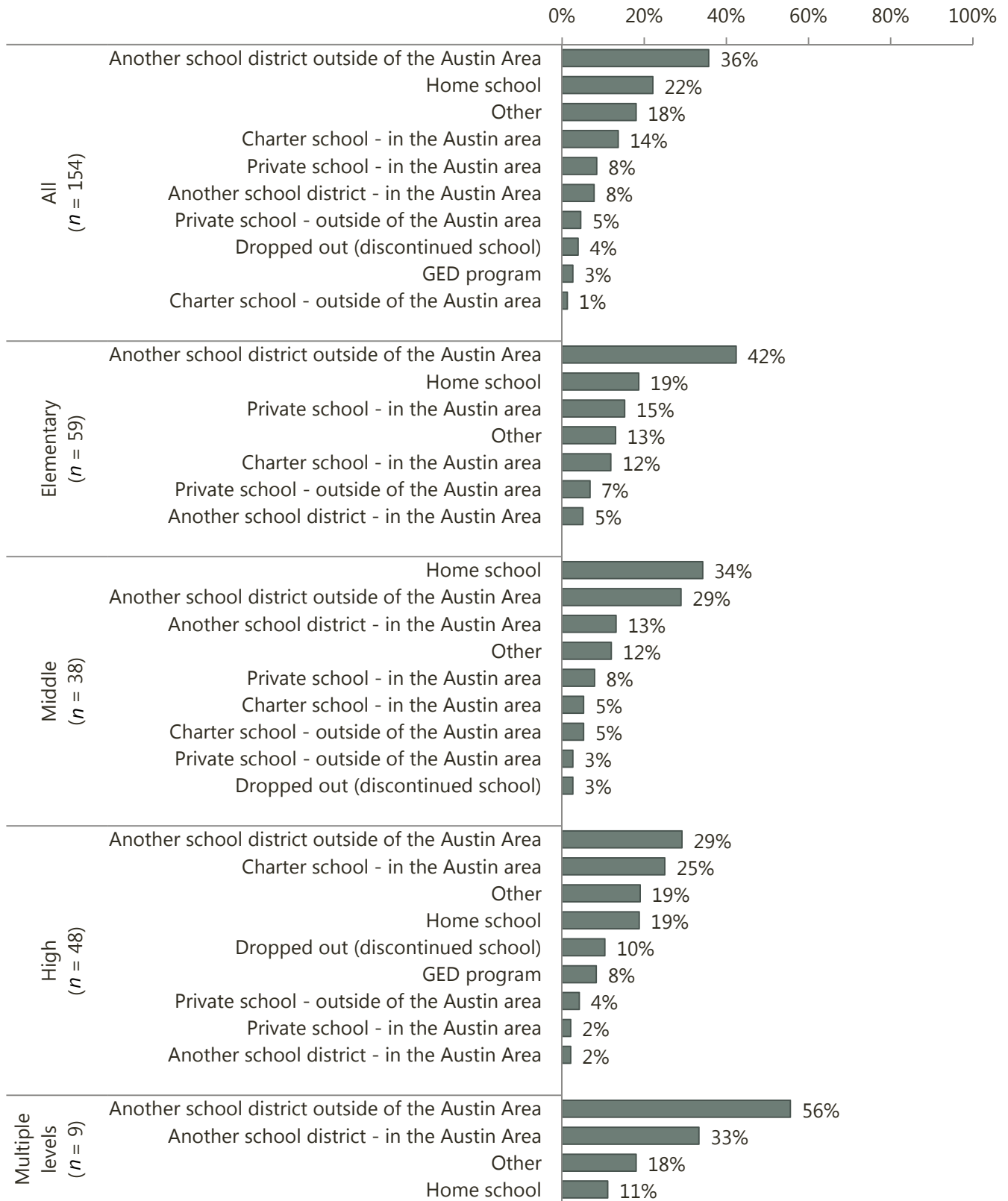
Although two parents wrote that they felt the curriculum was too rigorous for their child, respondents who gave answers in this category were more likely to worry their children weren’t being challenged enough:

[at Back to School night] the teachers did a great job of explaining what was going to happen during the year, but I had a major concern: they said they were going to teach to the lowest common denominator. This was in every class, when they had the room filled with parents. After each class, I went to the teacher directly and asked "Did you just say that you're not going to be able to help the kids that are faster and that may get bored while you try to teach to the slowest kids?" And each of them replied that I understood that correctly. I was floored.

*Where do students go after they leave AISD schools?*

Families were asked to identify the type of school their child enrolled in after leaving AISD, if

Figure 1. Summary: "Where did your child (or children) go after leaving AISD?"



Source. AISD Leaver Survey



applicable. Parents could choose from a range of options or indicate “other” and provide a written response. Results for this item are displayed in Figure 1.

**Key finding: After withdrawing from AISD, most children enroll in public school in a district outside of Austin, or are homeschooled.**

Overall, the highest percentage of parents selected “another school district outside of the Austin area.” This is consistent with the earlier finding that the most common answer for withdrawing from AISD was a family move.

The percentage of homeschooled students varied somewhat by level. Middle school families were more likely to report that their children were now being homeschooled (34%) than were respondents from families of elementary (19%) or high school (19%) students.

**Schools to which students moved.** Respondents also were given the opportunity to indicate which school their child was now attending. A complete list of schools that were reported can be found in Appendix A. Consistent with the high number of families who moved out of the district, many of the schools listed were outside the Austin area, the state, and even the country. Most schools listed were cited by only one family. One exception was that four families indicated their high school students had withdrawn from AISD to attend one of the Premier charter schools located at Lanier and Travis High Schools.

***What recommendations did respondents have for improvements AISD could make to support families in the future?***

One hundred and thirty-two respondents provided an answer to the question “What could AISD do to improve services to families like yours in the future?” This was an open-ended, essay-style question; therefore, respondents could give more than one reason. A detailed list of the coded categories and themes for this item and the percentage of respondents who provided each type of response can be found in Table 3.

Responses to this question paralleled the reasons parents gave for withdrawing their children from AISD. Areas for improvement included the learning environment, school support, district policies, academics, and testing.

**Key finding: Many families had a positive experiences in AISD.**

When given the opportunity to provide feedback about ways in which the district could better support families, 20% of respondents indicated they had a positive experience in AISD and/or that the district could not have better supported their family. Examples of comments from these families include:

No improvement needed. Fantastic experience for us!

Table 3. Summary: “What could AISD do to improve services to families like yours in the future?”

	All (n = 132)	Elementary (n = 42)	Middle (n = 36)	High (n = 48)	Multiple levels (n = 6)
<b>Learning environment</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>50%</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>100%</b>
More compassion/understanding for kids	13%	12%	14%	15%	—
Reduce class sizes	13%	26%	6%	8%	—
More recess/downtime	11%	36%	—	17%	—
Create a more positive environment	9%	12%	6%	4%	50%
Better behavior management	6%	10%	3%	6%	—
Enforce bullying policies	5%	2%	17%	—	—
Get rid of dress code	4%	2%	3%	—	50%
Improve school safety	2%	2%	3%	2%	—
Reduce drug use/more severe penalties/more programs	2%	—	—	6%	—
<b>Support from school/staff</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>39%</b>	<b>21%</b>	<b>100%</b>
Keep parents informed of child's progress	12%	14%	3%	—	—
Better training/resources for children with learning disabilities	8%	7%	—	6%	83%
Better staffing/training for special education staff	6%	5%	8%	4%	17%
Proactive with struggling students	5%	—	17%	2%	—
Better counseling services	5%	10%	3%	2%	—
More responsive when asked for help	5%	2%	17%	—	—
Be approachable and caring to families	4%	10%	—	2%	—
More special education resources	2%	10%	3%	2%	—
Support children to learn at their own pace	2%	5%	—	—	—
<b>Nothing/Our experience was positive</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>27%</b>	<b>0%</b>
<b>District policies</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>24%</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>—</b>
Give more local control to schools	5%	5%	6%	4%	—
Hold principals accountable/more oversight	3%	—	3%	6%	—
Improve information systems/keep better track of our information	2%	7%	—	—	—
Let kids stay if they move outside of boundary	2%	5%	3%	—	—
Move magnets to central Austin	2%	5%	—	—	—
Remove inadequate teachers/principals	2%	—	3%	2%	—
Relax attendance policy	1%	2%	3%	—	—
<b>Testing</b>	<b>22%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>—</b>
Focus on kids, not accountability	12%	10%	6%	4%	—
Less test pressure	8%	10%	3%	—	—
Reduce testing	2%	—	—	4%	—
<b>Academics</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>—</b>
More/better tutoring	6%	—	—	4%	—
Communicate relevance of schoolwork to students	3%	—	—	8%	—
Flexibility/more choices for HS students	2%	5%	—	2%	—
More advanced classes/challenging work	2%	5%	6%	—	—
Better library and technology resources	2%	—	8%	—	—

Source. AISD Leaver Survey

None you did a great job

Nothing that I am aware of. Our other children attended same school with no problems. Hers was a special situation.

One parent was particularly disappointed in her child's new school, compared with her family's experience in AISD:

Nothing I can think of. We were very pleased with the high standards of AISD. On the contrary we are now disappointed to find that [OTHER DISTRICTS] do not come close to meeting the high standards we were accustomed to. My son has been very unhappy with what he calls the "dumbed down" standards here in [OTHER DISTRICT].

**Key finding: Families are focused on finding safe, nurturing learning environments for their children.**

Across school levels, 66% of respondents indicated the district could better support their family by improving the learning environment at their child's school, particularly with regard to the management of student behavior, safety, and compassion for children:

Hire teachers that really are concerned with children and their education for starters.....

Provide more active learning time for the students, do NOT take recess away from the student's as a means to get students to do more work.

Create a safe environment for learning (understanding that sometimes kids are just bully's). However, the solution presented was to move the bullied kid to a different classroom. This feels like a punishment to a child who adored his teacher and had other good friends in class. How about addressing the behavior of the bully with THEIR parents and remove that kid from class?

Pay more attention to classroom teachers' behavior with students, many are creating a stressful prison-like environment- so that all the 4th grade children in my cub-scout den report to me that they are "bad" now, as per a 'talk' [THE PRINCIPAL] had with the entire 4th grade after a morning assembly, when she held them back to say this.

Be more proactive when students are struggling. Implement a no tolerance bullying policy and insist the principal and staff enforce it.

If a school states they have a "no bullying" policy, they should really practice what they preach. Kids should not be allowed to attend if they are not going to be respectful to others, even if it is a public school.

Simply care about the student as a human being.

Train teachers to understand that self esteem for a child is very important and they are very sensitive to being constantly harassed by their educators.

**Key finding: Families need school staff to be responsive, informative, and very well trained.**

About half of families who responded to this question indicated that AISD could better support their family by being more supportive and communicative with regard to their children. Communication/

keeping parents informed was one of the most common recommendations. One parent wrote:

Work with and listen to the child's parents, see beyond the numbers. ... he was not "failing" by the numbers, but he was struggling. He started the year with 95 -98, which became 90-95, and slid to 85-90 ... he did not have the tools to keep up. His medically diagnosed condition made it difficult for him to stay on top of his myriad of responsibilities. He needed someone to work with him, to teach him tools and tricks to keep himself organized. He was denied these services.

The desire for better support from school staff was particularly salient to families of elementary students; 62% of respondents indicated a need for more support from school and district staff. One parent of an elementary school student wrote:

Respond to communication (emails, phone calls). There seems to be a practice - intentional or not - of ignoring requests, whether for a meeting or additional information - in the hope perhaps that eventually the person making the request will go away.

The issue of support from school and district staff also was addressed by families of students with special needs, including chronic illness:

Better training for administrators and counselors on anxiety. More flexibility that would have allowed him to continue reintegration efforts.

Someone from Special Ed should have worked with me to find a solution to educating my daughter. I am very upset that no options and no other help was offered.

... Educate the teachers more about dyslexia and give them skills of how to help a child be successful and not feel dumb. Very frustrating to me that we are in a good school like [ELEMENTARY SCHOOL] that can educate a child to speak Chinese but [ELEMENTARY SCHOOL] does not have the funds to teach a child how to read and process sounds in his own native language, if that child is diagnosed as Dyslexic. I think the Chinese Emersion program at [ELEMENTARY SCHOOL] is a big waste of my tax dollars, when they should be spent to help children with learning disabilities succeed.

There needs to be a better and more helpful policy for students with chronic illnesses who are too sick to be at school as often as they should be, but not sick enough to qualify for homebound services. There seems to be nothing for these students that I am aware of. We have had to withdraw my student about half way through each year because he cannot make it due to his chronic health issues. We were actually encouraged to withdraw him when he was in the fifth grade by the principal. It was like pulling teeth, trying to find out what options were available to him. No information was forthcoming from anyone.

[Key finding: Families expect academic rigor, not over-emphasis on testing.](#)

Although responses about academics and testing made up a small percentage of the response to the question, those who did choose to provide feedback about these areas focused on the balance between academic rigor and the need to prepare children to perform well on state assessments. One parent wrote:

Put the focus back on education. What they learn in the classroom matters. My standardized test scores MEAN NOTHING to me today. They won't mean anything to my children, either.

Several parents suggested that eliminating testing might be the best solution:

Do away with a State mandated test that is just for the [monetary] gain for a group of people that are making hundreds of millions rather than paying the teacher what they need to teach our children basic school work and get away from the politics and money making operations for a group of people in lieu of our children's education.

....get rid of the state testing that is required....(its all that is focused on and is absolutely ridiculous!)

Others recommended making the curriculum more rigorous. For example,

We want [our child] to attend more advanced math class.

Be more college ready.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The goal of the family leaver survey was to address limitations in what was known about why families withdraw their students from AISD schools. The survey addressed three questions: (a) What were your reasons for leaving AISD? (b) Where did your child (or children) go after leaving AISD? (c) What could AISD do to improve services to families like yours in the future? Although only 10% of eligible families responded to the survey, they provided thoughtful and detailed responses to the questions and some important information for the district.

One of the most important findings from the survey is that many families withdrew their students for reasons beyond the control of the district—namely, families or children who moved out of the district. Subsequently, many families who responded to this survey indicated that their children were not enrolled at other Austin area public schools, but outside the district, the state, and even the country. Many families who withdrew their children indicated they had a positive experience in AISD.

For those families who removed their children from AISD for reasons other than moving away from the district, concerns seemed to focus on their perceptions of the child's learning environment and the responsiveness and support they received from school and district staff. Consistent with this, respondents provided recommendations for district improvement that were aligned with those same areas.

Although more than one-third of respondents indicated they withdrew their child(ren) from an AISD school because of a family move, action should be considered for other common responses. Below are three areas within which small changes to practice and the examination of existing data could have potential for improving the partnerships between schools and families.

**1. Communicate with parents about district and school efforts to monitor and improve the learning environment.** Concerns about the school learning environment were among the reasons families cited most frequently for withdrawing their child(ren) from AISD schools. AISD has been working to improve school climate for many years, through campus programs such as Positive Behavior Support, Social Emotional Learning, No Place for Hate, and Whole Child-Every Child. In addition, since 2003, AISD has

conducted a Student Climate Survey in grades 3 through 11, the results of which are posted on the AISD website each spring. School staff should continue to work with parent organizations (e.g., the Parent-Teacher Association [PTA] and their Campus Advisory Council [CAC]) to review the climate data and discuss the ways in which the school has made and should continue to make improvements to the safety, supportiveness, and academic focus of the school learning environment. Additional outreach opportunities might include showcasing climate-related programs during back-to-school night or during other well-attended school events.

In addition to sharing information, families can be important allies in the climate improvement process. Sharing information about successes and plans to improve climate, and providing parents with genuine opportunities to share their concerns and offer recommendations for improvement will both improve parents' perceptions of the school and generate potentially actionable suggestions.

**2. Continue to incorporate opportunities for parents to engage in meaningful two-way communication with teachers and administrators to discuss their child's needs.** Many schools in AISD excel at creating partnerships with families to collaborate on providing children with the best educational experiences possible. There are several practices in which these schools engage that should be incorporated into the work of all schools. First, annually, AISD conducts a Parent Survey wherein families can provide feedback about their experiences with the school during the past year. School staff should review the results of this survey and assess the extent to which parents feel school staff were welcoming, were responsive, and provided opportunities for families to communicate with them. Any areas in which ratings are below acceptable levels should be addressed with the faculty and staff to plan for improvement.

Second, basic excellent customer service practices should continue to be observed by all faculty and staff, particularly with respect to responding to emails and telephone messages in a timely manner. Multiple parents wrote that they requested meetings, conferences, or phone calls from school staff, but that their requests were ignored. Third, there is an important distinction between providing families with the opportunity to give feedback and providing opportunities for ongoing dialogue. In order to make improvements to the perceptions parents have about the supportiveness of the school of their child, both are required. For some parents, the opportunity to share their concerns and discuss the ways in which the school will support their child may be critical; for others, the opportunity to share their recommendations or concerns may be enough. In either case, it is up to the school staff to value these communications and allow parents to be true partners in their child's educational experiences.

**3. Collect more data about why people leave.** Finally, the experiences shared by the 199 families who completed this survey may or may not be representative of the experiences of all families who withdraw their children from AISD schools, but it does provide a base of information from which to work for subsequent surveys. In the future, an annual survey of leavers would allow for refinement and validation of the categories identified here. In addition, more information could be gathered about the

role various factors played in the decision to withdraw a student. For example, did any families move out of the district specifically so their children could attend schools elsewhere? Or to what extent are leavers more satisfied with their new schools than they were in AISD?

## Appendix A. Specific Schools Identified by Respondents as Schools to Which Their Children Transferred

Elementary	N		N
REAL learning Academy	2	Jennie Reid	1
Dripping Springs ISD	1	JL Smith Academy	1
Austin Discovery School	1	Leander ISD	1
Brookhollow Elem in Pflugerville ISD	1	Mainspring Schools (daycare)	1
Calwell heights elementary	1	Memorial Christian Academy	1
Clemens Crossing Elementary School	1	Murchison, Pflugerville ISD	1
COMAL COUNTY SCHOOL DISTRICT	1	Nanjing Lixue Elementary School of China	1
Dripping Springs Elementary	1	Neidig Elementary	1
Eden Park Academy	1	Oak Springs Elementary	1
Elementary School of Wuhan University, China	1	Oakdale Elementary School, Normal IL	1
Elm Grove	1	Progress School of Austin	1
First Harmony School of Science and then Cactus Ranch Elementary	1	Saint Nicholas of Flue School, Heredia, Costa Rica	1
Gethsemane Lutheran Children's Ministry preschool	1	Sampson Elementary School	1
Grandview hills elementary	1	Santa Cruz Catholic School Buda, TX	1
Harmony School of Excellence	1	Shaw Elementary, Beavercreek, OH	1
High Pointe Elementary, Nixa, Mo	1	Spring Hill Elementary	1
Hillcrest	1	St Mark's Episcopal school	1
Hiwasee Dam	1	St. Francis	1
Holbrook Elementary/Cyfair ISD	1	Whole Life Learning/Parkside Montessori	1
HSA	1		

Middle	N		N
AESA Prep Academy	1	Hill Country Middle School	1
Michaels	1	Hudson Bend Middle School	1
Austin Achieve	2	John H. Wood Jr. Charter District San Antonio, TX	1
Bryan High School	1	Keystone	1
Canyon Vista	1	Manor Middle School	1
Dawson Middle school	1	New Castle	1
Del Valle Middle, Popham	1	Plano ISD	1
Dripping Springs ISD	1	Smithville ISD	1
Emerald Cost Middle School	1	Texas Virtual Academy	1
Futeca	1	Vernon Middle School, Harlingen, TX	1
Harris Middle School	1	Wallace Middle School , Hays ISD	1

Source. AISD Leaver Survey



## Appendix A. Specific Schools Identified by Respondents as Schools to Which Their Children Transferred—continued

High	N		N
Premier	4	Keystone	1
Elgin	2	Texas Virtual Academy	1
Brandon Hall School	1	Key West High School (Monroe County ISD, FL)	1
Cedar Springs High School	1	Lago Vista High School	1
Central East Dauphin High School	1	Marine Military Academy	1
Del Valle High School	1	Masters	1
Edison High School	1	Our own home	1
Galveston Aim	1	Sci-Tech Preparatory	1
Godwin High School, Richmond, VA	1	Shoemaker High School, Killeen, TX	1
Hays HS	1	Temple High School	1
James Marshall High School	1	UT University Charter School	1
JJ Pearce RISD	1		

Source. AISD Leaver Survey

Multiple levels	N		N
Alexander city middle school	1	Hellen Keller Saltillo Mexico	1
Brushy Creek Middle School		Home school/then went to Wimberley ISD	1
Bryan Tx School district	1	Manor ISD	9
Cedar Valley Middle School	1	Pioneer Crossing Elementary	1
Connally HS/Westview MS	1	UT University Charter School	1
Decker Middle School	1		
Dripping Springs ISD	1		

Source. AISD Leaver Survey

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