

# School district not surrendering education to charter schools

*Sam Guzman, Local Contributor*

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In its Nov. 5 editorial, "East Austin community deserves voice," the American-Statesman claimed that "Superintendent Meria Carstarphen wants to cede the job of educating East Austin students to an outside charter operator." As a long-standing member of the East Austin community and trustee for District 2, I disagree.

First, as an in-district charter school, IDEA would be a public school funded by taxpayer dollars. The district would not "pay" IDEA Public Schools millions of dollars to run schools. An IDEA school would be an Austin school district public school, funded based on average daily attendance. Also, no campuses would be "closed and reopened as IDEA charter schools." Rather, programming at existing schools would be redesigned and phased in with successful and results-driven academic programs.

Building partnerships to encourage innovation and strengthen students' academic performance is not new in Austin. In establishing the Ann Richards School for Young Women and the Global Studies program at Austin High School, the district partnered with outside entities to strengthen existing programming. As the editorial noted, partnerships could boost fundraising with foundations, which would benefit students during these challenging economic times.

Second, the district remains firmly committed to and deeply rooted in East Austin. Carstarphen is responding directly and strategically to direction from the board and the Texas Education Agency, as part of a state-mandated reconstitution plan that requires "another entity that has proven expertise ... to help the district ensure successful implementation."

This year, board members directed her to explore and establish a rich portfolio of options for families. Our experience with other partnerships has proved that the district becomes stronger when we welcome fresh perspectives and innovative ideas to the way we do business. In the case of IDEA, this includes how we recruit and train teachers, ensure all students can read by first grade, and integrate all students, regardless of special needs, into a college-bound culture.

I am troubled by those who question whether the district should be investing in a college-prep program for students in my district. Many have suggested that we focus on vocational education because these students may not be interested in attending college, or cannot afford it. But the district should prepare every student to graduate from high school equipped to succeed in college, career and life. We have a moral obligation to do so. This is a crucial investment for our future, and we as a community cannot sell our students short.

Third, despite numerous efforts to turn things around, the district still faces challenges that contribute to low performance in numerous East Austin schools. We need to address long-standing issues that pre-date Carstarphen's arrival in 2009. Since then, she has publicly confronted what others have swept under the rug: TAKS commended rates, which are indicators of college readiness, are too low at the elementary level; too many students leave the district for charters or transfer to Austin High School; there is no feeder middle school to bolster enrollment at the Eastside Memorial High School at the Johnston Campus; and, though high school completion and graduation rates are improving, they are not comparable to other schools in the district.

Finally, no decisions are "being rushed." The board initially considered and authorized applications for a charter campus or program 10 years ago. This past year, trustees approved changes to the policy, designating in-district charters. And, in June of this year, the board authorized the superintendent to explore a partnership with IDEA.

Throughout the fall, at large community meetings and small group discussions with advisory groups and

individuals, Carstarphen and her team have discussed and revised scenarios and have elicited feedback. Parents and community representatives have even visited IDEA Public Schools in the Rio Grande Valley to observe the program at work. I, too, continue to work with many parents and community members who share my sense of urgency about the issue of failing schools in our neighborhoods.

Our children in East Austin should not have to wait any longer to have access to the same high-quality education and support that other students throughout the district expect and receive.

Guzman, an Austin trustee since 2007, represents District 2 on the school board. He is a 30-year resident of the district.

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