

HISD DISTRICT V CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE – Kara DeRocha

ZONING

1. Do you believe in periodic rezoning of schools? If so, on what basis?

If a school is consistently over capacity such that class sizes are consistently over the state law's cap of 22:1 for grades K-4, and other options should be investigated such as T-buildings, adding onto or building up the current school and consulting with demographers about population growth.

- a. Would you vote FOR or AGAINST rezoning the West University Elementary boundary lines?

My vote would be based on the input of West U parents and the reasonable options given to maintain high academic standards.

- b. If FOR, how would where would you propose sending zoned West University Elementary students?

WAIVERS

2. Under state law, the ratio of students to teachers in a kindergarten thru 4th grade classroom must not exceed 22:1 without a waiver from the Texas Education Agency. Would you vote FOR or AGAINST reducing and/or eliminating waivers in HISD?

I am FOR the reduction and elimination of waivers. Student to teacher ratios are a huge predictor of student outcomes.

However, it is possible to mitigate these numbers by adding floating teaching assistants, and/or partnering with local universities to add student teachers to classrooms, to manage class size. There are also some creative ways to use teacher aids with different school day structures that will allow students to have qualified instruction time with a teacher, but meet with teacher aids when working in stations or perfecting skills.

- a. If FOR, what remedy would you apply for the overflow of students?

On what basis would you select schools for the first reduction or elimination of waivers?

We cannot carry out this plan until we have determined where students will go. And we cannot make those decisions without involving parents and community members in the discussion. The fact is that the quality of the neighborhood school very much

affects home values and we need to not only preserve our children's educational needs but also protect the investment of our community members.

3. What is your position on a student who resides within his or her neighborhood school zone, such as West University Elementary, for example, not being allowed to attend his or her neighborhood school based on capping?

This issue has affected several families that I know. It is basically the anti-thesis of the neighborhood school theory. To keep our communities strong it is imperative that we keep our students in their neighborhood schools. The flip side of this argument is that class sizes must remain manageable for both instruction by teachers and learning by students.

We need to solve the underlying issue. West U Elementary may not be large enough for its current population. HISD needs to meet with demographers and determine what the long-term population growth for the area will be and make a plan for the West U structure. We need to determine if the school is able to sustain the growth by itself or not. I understand that West U parents want to keep their children at West U Elementary, in the building, on the property, all together. And I want that for West U, too. We need to look at all options and think outside the box to keep this community intact.

FUNDING

4. Currently, HISD follows the following weights for funding of various classification of students:
 - a. Free/Reduced Lunch x .075
 - b. At-Risk x .075
 - c. Special Education x .15
 - d. Gifted and Talented x .12
 - e. Career and Technology x .35
 - f. English Language Learner x .1
 - g. Homeless x .05
 - h. Refugee x .05

Do you feel these weights are inequitable?

These multipliers are very closely aligned with the weights outlined by the TEA for special student classifications. In other words, HISD is following state guidelines and funding formulas with these weights. Below is a breakdown of those allocations:

Classification	HISD Weight ¹	TEA Weight ²
Free/Reduced Lunch	0.075	0.2
At-Risk	0.075	
Special Education	0.15	0.12 to 5 (depending on nature of placement)
Gifted and Talented	0.12	0.12
Career and Technology	0.35	0.35
English Language Learner	0.1	0.1
Homeless	0.05	0 (not defined by TEA)
Refugee	0.05	0 (not defined by TEA)

¹ From 2017-2018 HISD Student Allocation Handbook

² From “Student Weighting” found at https://tea.texas.gov/Finance_and_Grants/State_Funding/Manuals/School_Finance_Topics_-_One_Page_Descriptions/

I would like to see more information from HISD on how the 0.15 multiplier was calculated for Special Education.

It is important to note that because of the decentralized nature of HISD, principals are given this money as a lump sum and are not required to spend the money as allocated. I am much more concerned about how these funds are spent on the school level. Title I and Title III (federal) funds have always had to be accounted for, but up to a year and a half ago, the rest of a school’s budget spending did not have to be coded. Many schools had little concrete data on how they were spending their annual budgets. There is now data available that will allow for a thorough evaluation of spending on a school-by-school basis.

- a. If yes, how would you propose to change them and how would you find funding?
5. Do you commit to ensuring the rebuild of Bellaire High School?
Yes. We voted in the bond election to rebuild this school and therefore we are obligated to see this project through to completion.
6. What is your position on HISD placing a cap on the amount of money PTOs at schools may raise?
I don’t think that such a cap should exist.
 - a. Would you vote FOR or AGAINST setting maximums PTOs could raise?
Against
7. Do you support the ability of a school and community to raise money for their own school building enhancements?

Yes, with two caveats: 1) building enhancements must be approved by HISD, and 2) the school and community understand that they are responsible for the maintenance of that equipment and/or enhancement.

8. Did you vote in FOR or AGAINST the recapture measure to send taxpayer dollars to the state?

a. If FOR (to send the money to the state), why?

I voted FOR, for a variety of reasons because the language of Prop 1 was that it allows the School Board to write a check to the State, but does not REQUIRE them to write a check. In the future, the School Board has the option to detach property, which I do not agree with, or write a check directly to another school district as outlined in the Recapture law.

b. If AGAINST (not to send the money to the state), why?

9. HISD increased teacher salaries by 3% for the 2017-2018 school year. Many, including the Houston Federation of Teachers, were in favor of a 5% increase.

a. Would you have voted for 3% or 5%?

I would have voted for the 3% given the information I currently have as a lay person. Even with just the 3% increase our budget for the next year is \$106 million in the hole.

I think as time goes on and we are better able to control HISD spending through a more centralized system and with better oversight of contracts that we will get to the point where we can pay our teachers a more competitive salary. It is one of my goals as a Trustee to do so.

b. If 5%, where would you have found the extra funding since HISD is currently in a deficit?

AUTONOMY

10. Do you believe in the centralization of HISD decision-making and using a staffing model or a decentralized system allowing schools and their Shared Decision-Making Committee to decide what is best for the school?

I believe in a happy medium between these two extremes. Students can't succeed without high quality teachers. And teachers need the support of their principals. Principals, in turn, need to receive structured support from the Central Office. Change must begin at the top within the Central Office by providing principals with meaningful and consistent guidance, meaning we need a more centralized system, but not a completely centralized system.

It is important for us to recognize that because of the diversity within Houston, each school will have different needs and we should respect that by giving schools some

autonomy. One size will not fit all in HISD, we are simply too large and too diverse. However, we have lost some of the power resulting from our size by breaking off into small fiefdoms. We have lost buying power, our curricula vary across campuses, we are not sharing successful outcomes, and it has caused competition between our schools, resulting in some very strong schools, and some very weak ones. Special Education has gotten lost in the shuffle, and the right hand often doesn't know what the left hand is doing or even responsible for. Redundancy runs rampant and principals are left to their own devices to figure out major problems, from school overcrowding to budget shortfalls for the most part on their own.

11. What is your position on changing the names of schools as in the context of Lanier Middle School's name change?

While I do not have objections to many of the name changes for our schools, I do take issue with how they were pushed through the approval process and the inaccuracy of the actual cost of the name changes.

The overall Naming Facilities policy is very loosely written. There is no timeline included in the document. Thus the renaming of schools and HISD buildings has been pushed through the outlined process with very little public discussion, and even very little input by Trustees. All in all, this policy should be revisited and strengthened to protect the voices of the constituency.

MAGNETS and VANGUARD

12. Under the current HISD structure, a school may propose to become a magnet to the district. Should schools maintain this ability or should HISD administration decide which schools should be magnets?

There is an application process to become a magnet school in HISD. Schools can apply for the magnet and HISD administration makes the decision. I think a school applying for magnet status needs to have community support to be successful.

13. Currently Magnet Vanguard schools receive additional weight for the Gifted and Talented students and also Magnet funding. Do you favor dropping the Magnet funding for Vanguard Magnets as a means to create equity across HISD?

The magnet system is treasured by many of our HISD families and I do not want to see it dissolved. At the same time, there are some inequities found throughout the entire Magnet Program. However, I will not lay all inequities in the magnet program at the feet of the Vanguard program. And we need to recognize that some magnet programs are more costly than others, though perhaps not as costly as portrayed in the current

allocations. I think the current magnet funding model needs to be adjusted, but I do not think we should take a machete to the program when a scalpel will get the job done.

Not only do we need to look at the amount that each type of magnet is allotted, but we need to address other inequities in the system. We also need to make sure magnet funds are going to the programs for which they are earmarked. We need to be sure that we have feeder patterns in all 4 quadrants of HISD for our most popular magnet high schools (such as HSPVA or DeBakey). And if magnet schools are not enrolling enough magnet students because they are over capacity or because they are not attracting enough magnet students, then HISD needs to change the way they are supporting these schools.

On the flip side, we need to make sure that magnet programs are equitable in terms of opportunities for enrollment (because not everyone has access to a computer for the application process) and that things like the sibling policy are expanded so that they include all grade levels, not just entry grade levels (K, 6th, and 9th). This way families can stay together.

EVALUATION

14. What types of checks and balances do you believe are applicable in the evaluation of principals and teachers since under the current structure, we do not have a test of measurement and evaluations are based on personal appraisals?

Teacher evaluations are based on personal appraisals that go through a calibrated rubric. However, even with all of this careful consideration, there are still flaws in the system. The checks on teachers right now is that teachers only have one year contracts and can be let go at the end of the year with no reason given.

On the books principal evaluations are still based on STAAR tests, but this has been waived in recent years, but is not permanent and it is known that if student performance is consistently low principals will be fired. The same way that teachers are required to demonstrate specific competencies, principals also need to have a similar evaluation. Principal evaluations should also include a 360 review.

The district needs to make a decision about what good teaching and what good principalships look like. Until this happens, there is no way to effectively compare teachers and principals across campuses. And this is all in the realm of the Superintendent, not that of the School Board. It is our job to review the proposed system and hold him accountable for it. Evidenced-based evaluations are needed. This is hard work and takes a large amount of time on the part of administrators

15. Do you support the new system of ranking schools A-F? Why or why not?

I disagree with the system as it is too simplistic in the outcome. Who wants to send their child to a B- school? This grading system is misleading. I would rather have raw data provided by schools and let parents evaluate that information and decide if a school is a good choice for their child.

16. How do you propose dealing with the STAAR Test administration this year, if you feel any change is necessary?

STAAR test administration is outside the control of the school board. However, given my druthers, I would ask the Governor to request a waiver for the test based on the unprecedented devastation that Hurricane Harvey has inflicted on our city using guidance issued by the Department of Education in September 2017.

Many of our students will be displaced for the entire school year in living conditions that are outside of even their parents' control. FEMA provides housing assistance for 18 months after a natural disaster. This is a reasonable timeline for getting back on our feet.

AT-RISK POPULATION

17. District V has the largest immigrant population of any of the school board districts. How do you feel HISD should handle our immigrant student population?

HISD's immigrant population is extremely diverse. Some of these students come from households where English has been taught since birth and their parents are on HB1 visas to work in the med center. Others come here with no English skills and little to any schooling. The Community School model is designed to even the playing field for all of our students and provide wrap-around services that allow our students to succeed.

Schools should be safe places for all kids. Immigration is the province of the Federal Law Enforcement and subsequently HISD is not responsible for its enforcement, nor should it be. Current HISD policy prohibits collection of citizenship status, and I agree with that. In addition, teachers need training on all aspects of this law and how it could impact the classroom. Teachers need to know what their rights are under this law.

WEBSITE

18. You may list your campaign website here so that voters can attain more information.

www.kara4hisd.com