



Houston Independent School District Board of Education

Candidate Questionnaire

Candidate Name: Maria Benzon

Office Sought: Houston ISD District V Trustee

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The mission of Houstonians for Great Public Schools (Houston GPS) is to increase public understanding of the roles and responsibilities of school board trustees and to hold trustees accountable for student outcomes. We need school districts that prepare *all* children for future success, and we believe strong school districts require great leadership.

Our organization's core values are: **Impact, Leadership, Collaboration, Equity and Stewardship**. These values should always serve the ultimate goal of **student success**. We invite you to participate in our candidate survey to provide more information to the public about your candidacy for the Houston Independent School District (HISD) Board of Education and your views on how to be a great leader for our children and our city. Unless otherwise noted, all answers should be limited to 100 words.

Your Background

1. *Please provide a brief biographical statement (i.e. Education, Number of children attending HISD schools [if any], Employment, Any elected offices you have held in the past and years held).*

I am an experienced school leader and educator. I worked at Wheatley MS (San Antonio ISD), Lawson MS in HISD (formerly Dowling MS), and Madison HS. My doctoral studies in educational psychology focused on student and teacher motivation, self-regulated learning, and racial-ethnic identity. Currently, I am the Assistant Principal in Southwest Schools where I work with Residential Treatment Centers. As an HISD parent of a 1st grader, Girl Scouts Troop Co-Leader, and President of Bellaire Young Mothers, I am committed to improving my community and creating a supportive environment for our children and families.

2. *Please provide information of any non-profits, boards or associations of which you are currently a member (include the dates of your membership and any officer positions held).*

I have served on the Bellaire Young Mothers (BYM) Board since 2015. For four years I have been the Speaker Coordinator. Since June 2020, my role has been President of BYM and I will continue to be in this role until at least June 2022. Also, I have been on on Education Leadership Council of EF+Math, a national organization, for almost 3 years. I have also continued to serve as a Regional T3 Instructor for Texas Instrument's Teachers Teaching with Technology group since 2012.



3. *Please briefly explain why you decided to run for this office.*

I am running to be the HISD Trustee in District V because I believe ALL students deserve a high-quality public education. School board trustees need to be knowledgeable of the successes and challenges in running schools, supporting teachers, and educating children. I bring that knowledge with 21+ years teaching and leading in urban schools and as a professor of math/science teachers. I bring a background in educational research in diversity, motivation, and classroom practices. As a parent of an HISD student and community leader, I want to ensure that ALL children have access to excellent and equitable learning opportunities.

4. *How active have you been in education issues and/or issues facing the Houston Independent School District? (Please share specific issues you have challenged or championed, what you did, and the length of time you were involved in the issue.)*

One issue facing HISD was the lack of highly qualified math and science teachers applying to work in HISD. As a UH professor from 2011-2016, I developed partnerships with elementary, middle, and high schools to identify effective teachers to mentor math and science majors who were curious about teaching. These college students would prepare engaging lessons and teach them to the mentor teacher's classroom full of students. With feedback, pre-service teachers' confidence grew, and their instructional strategies improved over the other field-based courses. Many students graduated with their teaching certificate and became math and science teachers in HISD.

5. *What are your top two concerns for the Houston Independent School District, and what are two ways you believe increase student success that the board appropriately can influence or control? [200 words]*

Concern: Black and Latinx students are disproportionately likely to attend chronically under-resourced schools. Addressing this resource gap requires progressive and equitable funding that improves staffing, reduces class sizes, and where students experience a strong educational program.

Concern: Students who lacked the supports to engage fully in online learning or learning through the pandemic will be returning to school with learning gaps. Teachers will be expected to improve student outcomes. ESSER funds need to be allocated equitably so schools have the resources to help bridge the gaps.

Student Success: One test taken on one day should never define a student, teacher, or school. After decades of testing, Texas ranks 43rd in the nation in educational outcomes. This system wastes resources that could be used to support learning that recognizes students' diverse and multi-faceted talents, knowledge, and ways of thinking.

Student Success: We have forgotten that high-stakes tests are not the only way to evaluate learning. Students can be more effectively evaluated through performance-based assessments, deep sampling, and curriculum-aligned tests created by



educators -- not for-profit testing companies. Teachers and schools can be evaluated holistically through walkthroughs, climate surveys, and classroom data collected over the school year.

A. Impact

We expect our leaders to set clear goals and to measure their progress by asking questions and using time-appropriate data. We also expect leaders to continue their learning and to represent not only his/her distinct constituency, but also the entire school district.

- 1. As a board member, what are some ways you can gain knowledge to set clear goals for your individual district, the entire school district, and to measure the progress towards each goal?*

I can gain knowledge to set clear goals for District 5 and HISD and to measure the progress toward those goals by first analyzing the previous years' goals and the strategies utilized to reach those goals. I would get input from school leaders, teachers, and community members to see if other goals should be priorities or if some goals should continue to be focus areas. To measure the progress, we need to first decide what will be measured (e.g. time, money, grades, test scores). Then we need to review our progress often and consistently for each goal.

- 2. How would you increase your knowledge of the issues and goals facing each HISD trustee district?*

I would increase my knowledge of issues and goals facing each HISD district's trustee by talking to them and the various stakeholders about their observations and needs. I would attend conferences and meetings sponsored by PTOs, community groups, churches, and advocacy groups. I would identify the other trustee's values and priorities in order to create spaces of shared goals. Through these shared spaces, we can work through conflicts. In general, I would read educational research, qualitative case studies, and published policy analyses as a source of solutions and creative ways of thinking about school issues.

- 3. What groups or resources would you use to educate yourself on national educational trends and best practices for school districts and effective school board members?*

To better educate myself on educational trends and best practices, I would tap into the resources available in the Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA), Texas Association of School Boards (TASB), and National Education Association (NEA). I have attended a TASB webinar about running for school board and found the information shared to be useful.

B. Leadership

We expect our leaders to commit to responding to both the needs of a specific trustee district and the entire school district. We want leaders who recognize the scope of the office and understand the significance of their position.



1. *Explain your views on the role individual members of the board have when approaching controversial issues (for example, working towards greater consensus, finding a middle ground, public voting procedures, etc.)?*

While I believe that the board should have a unified vision and mission, I recognize that this may be challenging on controversial issues. All board members should ask for input from diverse members of the community and advocate for the needs of ALL students. An individual board member should be proactive in voicing his/her concerns and work toward building greater consensus with other board members and the community.

2. *In your own words, explain the difference between governance and management in a school district.*

Governance in a school district is focused on policymaking and not micro-managing. The school board should focus on establishing policies that improve student outcomes. Management in a school district is often more administrative such as presiding over grievances and appeals of parents, students, or employees.

3. *What expectations should a school board member have for the Superintendent and his/her staff?*

A school board trustee should expect that the Superintendent and his/her staff will work together to be accountable for district goals and initiatives that ensure ALL students are learning at high levels. A Superintendent's staff can provide background, options, best practice, and research to help trustees craft effective policies and to make informed policy decisions. There could opportunities for focused briefing sessions on key issues.

C. Collaboration

We expect our leaders to work as a team and to respect fellow board members and honor differences. Our leaders should be able to commit to the established district goals and trust each other's abilities while holding the Superintendent - the only staff member directly supervised by the board – accountable. We expect trustees to build the district culture they would like to see in administrators, staff, teachers, parents, and most importantly, students.

Like many elected bodies, the HISD school board has struggled with issues of transparency, leadership, and collaboration. One of the most divisive issues in recent years was the abrupt replacement of Interim Superintendent Grenita Lathan with former Superintendent Abe Saavedra in October, 2018. Although it was rescinded three days later, this measure passed in a 5-4 vote and was the subject of a TEA investigation in the months that followed.

1. *Do you think the actions taken by the majority of the board were appropriate and warranted? If so, please explain how/why. If not, briefly explain how you or the board could have led differently on the issue.*

I do not support the violation of the Open Meetings Act. Thus, the actions taken by much of the board were not appropriate or warranted. The board members who voted to replace Lathan should have resolved the issue in a closed session. If I was



on the board, I would have discussed my position for not accepting Lathan and my support for conducting a Superintendent search. Behind closed doors, I would explain that Lathan should apply as part of the Superintendent search. The board needed to discuss and build consensus about the characteristics and qualifications of HISD's future Superintendent.

2. *Knowing there will be disagreements at times over particular issues, what are some ways you plan to work collaboratively with your fellow board colleagues?*

For disagreements, I plan to focus on the shared expectation of respect and a shared vision of ensuring ALL students have equitable opportunities to learn. I will talk to other board members privately to understand more acutely the reasons for our differing positions and provide justification for my position. I also plan to have an open-door policy to invite trustees to ask questions, challenge details, and continue the conversation so we can create the best outcome for our students and teachers.

3. *How do you plan to approach situations in which you disagree with the Superintendent (and/or your colleagues)?*

When in disagreement with the Superintendent or colleagues, I plan to meet with them to better understand their position and to see if we can come to a common ground. If not, then depending on the issue, I may present research and policy analysis that provides evidence that supports my position as well as evidence that shows that their position is not the best option. Depending on the issue, I may be relentless on my position or willing to adjust my expectations and compromise.

D. Equity

We expect our leaders to demonstrate a commitment to social justice by recognizing the needs of different populations, acknowledging blind spots, and serving *all* children. We expect trustees to identify systems and practices rooted in institutional bias (racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia and others) and take proactive steps to reverse the negative impact of that bias.

1. *Given the major disparities in student outcomes, particularly between Black and Latine students and their White and Asian counterparts, identify at least two ways that the Houston ISD Board of Education could ensure an equitable education for all students.*

One way to ensure equitable education is by HISD recognizing the resource gap and need for equitable funding to improve staffing (e.g., hiring effective teachers, providing stipends), smaller class sizes (so students can get more 1-on-1 attention from the teacher and so teachers can better manage students), and with high-quality instruction (e.g., culturally relevant pedagogy, high-quality materials).

Another way to ensure equitable education is by ensuring students continue to have access to wraparound services. We can support HISD's young people by investing in social-emotional learning, restorative justice practices, and wraparound services for health and well-being



- 2. Houston has a number of student groups that have been historically marginalized and underserved, across many lines of difference. Each of these groups has different, specific needs. What will be your approach as a board member to address the varied needs of Houston students?*

If it was in my district, I would visit with people to identify the needs, listen to concerns and suggested solutions, and devise solutions by connecting them to resources or drafting/presenting policies to be considered by the school board.

If it were in other districts, I would go with the other board members to visit these areas so we can work together to identify the needs, listen to concerns and suggested solutions, and present policy that supports these marginalized and underserved groups.

- 3. As a school board member, how would you dramatically increase the quality of Houston's ten lowest performing schools?*

In order to dramatically increase the quality of Houston's ten lowest performing schools, I would recommend having experienced school leaders and teachers who care about the student's mind as well as their heart. In low performing schools, students may never have passed a state math test and lack self-efficacy to demonstrate their learning. Leaders need to create an environment where students celebrate the idea that mistakes are opportunities to learn. We can recruit teachers with financial incentives. We also need leaders who will support teachers with appropriate, relevant professional development or just be a supportive ear.

E. Stewardship

We expect our leaders to respect the oath of the office and understand fiscal controls and financial accountability. We believe they are responsible for allocating resources in a way that will improve outcomes for kids, and we want them to manage finances with prudence and integrity.

Being a good steward of taxpayers' money is essential to being a good leader. However, budget issues have continued to plague the district. Houston ISD trustees have approved a deficit budget in each of the last 5 years. These projected deficits have ranged from \$15,000,000 to \$107,000,000 annually, with several recurring expenditures coming from the district's fund balance. Despite the state's adjustments to recapture rules and repeated cuts to the Per-Unit-Allocation (PUA), which most directly affects students in the classroom, HISD has not yet reached a place of long-term financial stability.

- 1. The base PUA has been cut by \$455 per student over the last decade (excluding required adjustments for step increases in teacher salaries). Do you think the district should prioritize the student-based model of funding schools? If not, why not? And if so, how can the board ensure that cuts to the PUA will be restored?*

Yes, the district should prioritize the student-based model of funding. It helps ensure more funding is allocated to students with more expensive educational needs. The board can ensure that cuts to PUA will be restored by reducing staff at the district/leadership level.



2. *What expectations should school board members have for the Superintendent (and his/her staff) during the budgeting process?*

I expect the Superintendent and his/her staff to be able to align the budget with the district goals and initiatives to justify the expenses. I would like the Superintendent to be able to explain the purpose of the expenses and the alternatives considered before the decision was made.

3. *Will you commit to bringing the district closer to financial stability by passing a balanced budget? What cuts/changes can be made at the district level to both help HISD reach its student-outcome goals while maintaining a balanced budget?*

I am committed to being a good steward of public funds by bringing the district closer to financial stability. At the district level, I would not approve funding for tasers. I would eliminate the funding of charter-run schools in HISD.



Candidate Stance on Policies and Issues

Section 1: For each of the following statements, please rank your level of agreement on the following scale:

| Strongly Disagree | Somewhat Disagree | Somewhat Agree | Strongly Agree |
|-------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

At the conclusion of this section, you will have a total of 250 words to expand upon any of your responses.

NOTE: *These statements do not necessarily align with the issue positions of Houstonians for Great Public Schools and should not be represented as such. In fact, some statements are in direct contradiction to the values and opinions of our network. This exercise will help our members – and the broader public – better understand your positions on a wide range of issues.*

| Statement | Level of Agreement (Rank from 1-4) |
|---|------------------------------------|
| School sites should be able to adopt and pursue, with both time and budget, a unique theory of action based on their community's needs. | 4 |
| Houston ISD should have compensated, differentiated career pathways for effective teachers which includes roles that allow them to stay in the classroom (i.e. hybrid roles). | 4 |
| Increasing teacher compensation is one of my top 3 budget priorities. | 4 |
| Budget transparency is essential to building community trust. | 4 |
| Quantitative student outcome data is required to adequately set and measure progress toward district goals. | 4 |
| Schools should also serve as community hubs, where students and their families can access a number of services. | 4 |
| Currently, Houston ISD adequately resources programs to support Special Education. | 2 |
| The district should regularly enlist the assistance of an external entity to review its budgeting process and the allocation of funds. | |



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|---|---|
| I would give more funding to support students from traditionally under-served communities, in excess of the current Per Unit Allocation (PUA) and Title I funding. | 4 |
| Student outcome data should emphasize growth metrics rather than one-time achievement level. | 4 |
| Increasing the PUA is one of my top 3 budget priorities. | 3 |
| Houston ISD should partner with vetted external organizations (e.g. non-profits, colleges/universities, charter management organizations, etc.) to improve or maintain school performance and specialized programs in the district. | 2 |
| The district should regularly conduct an educator survey to identify factors that lower teacher retention rates. | 4 |
| Teacher compensation should be based solely on years of experience and certification/credentials. | 2 |
| Student and parent feedback should have a role in teacher evaluations. | 2 |
| In partnership with their community and staff, school leaders should be able to create their own budgets, hire new staff, select curriculum, and develop calendars. | 3 |
| I support a system for evaluating the quality of our schools that is primarily based on student outcome data and quantitative indicators of school culture (e.g. disciplinary actions, etc.). | 2 |
| As a default, principals should have wide-ranging authority to make critical decisions about their schools with minimal interruption from the central office. | 3 |
| Except in cases of serious illness or family emergency, School Board Trustees should be expected to attend all relevant committee meetings, agenda review meetings, and general meetings. | 4 |
| Houston ISD should remain a district of choice. | 4 |
| School board trustees should be involved in every level of district management, including personnel decisions in schools and in central office. | 1 |



Section 2 (OPTIONAL Section 1 response): In 250 words or fewer, expand on any of your responses to the statements above. You might use this section to add nuance to one of your positions or to provide additional context on your opinions. You may address as many statements from the above section as you would like, so long as your response falls within the 250-word limit.

At a minimum, teachers should be compensated based on experience and certification level. Ideally, I believe that HISD should be able to pay teachers differently based on other factors such as need. Stipends should be provided for hard-to-fill teaching positions such as STEM or Special Education teachers. I also would like to expand the scope of compensating school workers and include support staff such as custodians and cafeteria workers.

While student and parent feedback are important, the principal or instructional leader along with the other instructional leaders on campus should evaluate teachers. Parents or students can provide feedback informally to the teacher or administrators which can be used in the Principal's evaluation.

I support a system for evaluating the quality of our schools, but not based primarily on STAAR data or disciplinary actions. HISD can be a leader in reforming the broken high-stakes testing model by fighting for assessments that help students and teachers further their academic goals instead of measuring their ability to prepare for a single test. Furthermore, disciplinary actions as an indicator of school culture is not effective because of the number of Black students are suspended at a higher rate than White children. We need more counselors in schools to help students with their social, emotional, and psychological struggles.

I do NOT believe that school board trustees should be involved in any level of district management except for the Superintendent. Personnel decisions should happen at the school and not at the district office.

