

Houstonians for Great Public Schools
Candidate Questionnaire
Maria Benzon

Candidate Information

1. Brief bio: Education, HISD children (if any), employment, previous elected office(s).

EDUCATION

HISD High School

1992: Booker T. Washington and the HS for Engineering Professions

University of Texas at Austin

1997: BS Applied Learning & Development

1997: BA Plan II-Liberal Arts Honors

1999: MA Curriculum and Instruction

2024: GC Data Science and Business Analytics

University of Houston

2013: PhD Educational Psychology

HISD CHILD: Yes. She attended Condit ES last year and is attending Young Women's College Preparatory Academy now.

PREVIOUS ELECTED OFFICES: None

2. Civic involvement: Boards, organizations, officer roles (dates included).

- Bellaire Young Mothers: President (2020-Present), Speaker Coordinator (2015-2020)
- Community Voices for Public Education: Board Member (2023-Present)
- EF+Math Program: Advisory Board Member (2020-2025)
- Trenton Place Civic Corporation: President (2023), Vice President (2022)

3. Why are you running for HISD School Board?

I am running for HISD Trustee to stand up to the harmful policies and practices that have been initiated since Superintendent Mike Miles joined HISD. I am running to protect our students, educators, and families. First, I believe that we need to restore local control. I support the end to the state takeover and the return of decision-making to families, educators, and students through elected trustees. Second, I believe that we should put students first. As a teacher and parent, I will advocate for meaningful learning, qualified teachers, and less high-stakes testing. Third, I believe the district should spend our tax dollars smarter. I want to protect public dollars and ensure funding goes where it matters most: into classrooms, and not into bloated administrator salaries, bonuses, and spin bikes.

4. Top 3 priorities for increasing student success the board can influence (max 200 words).

My top three priorities for increasing student success center on restoring trust, supporting teachers, and ensuring responsible stewardship of resources.

First, I will work to restore democratic governance and community voice in HISD. Student learning thrives when families, educators, and communities are active partners in shaping policy. Transparency and accountability are essential to rebuilding trust and ensuring that decisions are made in the best interest of students.

Second, I will focus on recruiting and retaining excellent teachers. Students succeed when they are taught by committed, high-quality educators who are respected as professionals. This means fair compensation, professional autonomy instead of scripted or AI-generated lessons, and a supportive work environment where teachers can focus on meeting students' needs.

Third, I will ensure responsible budgeting and use of data. Every dollar and data point should serve students directly. Allowing unchecked spending and superficial reporting undermines student achievement. By requiring transparency and thoughtful oversight, we can direct resources into classrooms, student programs, and teacher support. We need to do this so all students have the opportunity to thrive.

Governance & Leadership

5. What is the role of a school board vs. the superintendent?

The school board sets the district's vision, goals, and policies; they make the rules. Trustees approve the budget, hire the superintendent, and speak for the community. They also check how the district is doing, approve what students learn (e.g., curriculum), and make choices about staff and buildings. Furthermore, school board members communicate with families about what is happening in the district.

In contrast, the superintendent runs the schools day-to-day and puts the board's plans into action. The superintendent gives advice, provides data, and presents a transparent budget to help the board make good choices. Ultimately, both groups must work together. The board makes the big decisions while the superintendent handles the daily work. Together, they make sure all students get a good education.

6. What are your expectations of the Superintendent during budgeting?

I expect the superintendent to present a clear, honest budget that prioritizes student success above all else. The budget should be transparent and understandable, so that families, educators, and community members can see exactly how resources are being used to support classrooms. Furthermore, accurate student enrollment numbers must be the foundation of the budget, since our funding depends directly on the number of

students we serve. The superintendent must also account for Texas Recapture, which significantly affects Houston ISD's available funds and requires careful planning to minimize negative impacts on students.

I expect the superintendent's staff to work closely with the Chief Auditor, who reports directly to the board, to ensure proper checks and balances. Currently, there is no Chief Auditor at HISD. Transparency is especially important in programs with major resource allocations, such as the New Education System (NES). Most importantly, every dollar in the budget should align with our district's goals for student outcomes and equity. The superintendent should demonstrate how proposed spending directly supports teachers, classrooms, and student learning so the board can make responsible, well-informed decisions on behalf of the community.

7. How would you handle disagreements with board members or the Superintendent?

Disagreements are inevitable, but how we handle them directly impacts trust and student success. I believe in approaching disagreements with respect, transparency, and a focus on shared goals. As a trustee, I would listen carefully to the perspectives of board members and the superintendent, while making sure the voices of students, families, and educators are also represented in the discussion.

I will use data, community input, and research-based practices to ground my positions. If I disagree, I will clearly explain my reasoning and propose constructive solutions, rather than simply opposing an idea. I also believe it is important to ask tough questions when decisions involve large investments or significant changes, such as those affecting teacher retention or the New Education System (NES). Ultimately, my goal is to ensure every decision reflects our responsibility to put students first, even when consensus requires difficult conversations.

8. How will you stay informed on national education trends and best practices?

I will stay informed through a variety of channels. I plan to attend state and national school board conferences to learn from other districts and share ideas. I will regularly read education research and publications to keep up with the latest studies and best practices not only in district leadership, but educational psychology. Just as important, I will listen closely to our teachers, parents, and students, who often identify challenges and solutions before they appear in national conversations. Visiting schools and seeing effective practices in action will also help me understand what truly works. Finally, any trend or practice I consider will be measured against our community's values and our students' real needs, ensuring that we adopt strategies because they are effective, and not just because they are popular.

9. What should elected trustees do during the state intervention and transition back to local control?

During the state intervention, elected trustees must serve as both watchdogs and bridge-builders for our community. Even without voting power, elected trustees still have a voice. They can attend board meetings (virtually or in-person), speak publicly with other elected officials about HISD concerns, send emails of questions to the unelected board about policies, data, and budget. The elected board can hold the appointed board accountable for transparency, spending, and student outcomes. Families deserve to know how resources are being used and whether policies and programs such as the New Education System are truly helping students.

I will amplify community voices that might otherwise be silenced under state control by listening to parents, teachers, and students, then communicating their perspectives to district leadership. Trustees must monitor what is happening now while preparing for the future. I'll track the district's progress toward meeting the state's criteria for returning control and stay informed about changes in programs, personnel, and policies.

When the transition happens, our community deserves trustees who are ready to lead from day one. I'll use this time to build the knowledge and relationships needed to serve effectively and ensure a seamless transition. My goal is to restore democracy in HISD with strong, informed leaders who are committed to rebuilding our district. Losing our vote should never mean losing our voice. The state takeover is temporary, but our responsibility to our children and community are permanent.

Community Engagement

10. How will you stay connected to issues and goals in HISD and your district?

Staying connected means being visible and accessible. I will hold regular community meetings in different neighborhoods throughout my district so families can share their concerns directly. I'll visit schools regularly not just for official events, but to see what's really happening in classrooms and talk with teachers, students, and staff. I'll maintain open communication channels through email, social media, and phone calls, and I'll make sure to respond promptly. I'll attend PTA meetings, community events, and neighborhood gatherings to hear from families where they are.

I'll also partner with community organizations, faith leaders, and local groups who already have trusted relationships in our neighborhoods. They can further help me understand issues affecting families and students. Most importantly, I'll track data on student outcomes, budget spending, and district progress toward our goals. Being connected means combining what I hear from the community with what the data shows, then using both to make informed decisions that serve our students.

11. What's your approach to engaging the community during your term?

My approach to engaging the community during my term begins with open communication and deep listening. I will create consistent opportunities through town halls, school visits, PTO meetings, and open office hours for families, educators, and students to share their priorities directly. While all communities want excellent teachers, resources, and safe, welcoming schools, I recognize that each neighborhood has unique needs. I will respect those differences and strengthen collaboration with nonprofits, local organizations, and universities to provide support where students live and learn. Transparency in how partnerships are formed and evaluated will be central to building trust. Most importantly, I will ensure that community input, especially from teachers, parents, and students, is not just heard but shapes board decisions. By valuing educator expertise and uplifting community voices, we can create schools that reflect the people they serve and rebuild public trust in HISD.

12. How would you navigate controversial decisions (e.g., school closures)?

Controversial decisions often hurt our most vulnerable families the hardest. I would center equity by asking who bears the burden. Too often, closures and cuts fall on Black and Brown communities, students with disabilities, and English learners. I'll fight against decisions that deepen inequality. I'll demand real community input that shapes decisions, not just listening sessions after choices are made. Meetings must be accessible to working families, non-English speakers, and people with disabilities. I'll also ask questions about these decisions. Before accepting closures, I'll examine wasteful spending (e.g., bloated administrative salaries) and explore alternatives. If closures are truly unavoidable, students deserve better opportunities, not worse. Students deserve a supportive transition and access to the same programs. I'll stand firm on equity and transparency, even when unpopular. Our most vulnerable students need trustees who will fight for them.

13. Which 3 student outcomes should HISD prioritize and why?

HISD should prioritize three outcomes that ensure all students succeed. First, we must focus on reading and math proficiency. These foundational skills open doors to advanced coursework and future opportunities. Every student deserves to master core academic content that prepares them for life beyond high school. Second, we need to close achievement gaps for underserved students. Too many students of color, English learners, and students from low-income families are falling behind. We must provide targeted resources, quality teachers, and culturally responsive instruction to the students who need it most. Equity means giving each student what they need to succeed. Third, we must prioritize social-emotional well-being and school climate. Students can't learn if they don't feel safe, supported, and connected to their schools. We need strong mental health support, positive school culture, and strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism.

These priorities work together to serve the whole child and build a stronger, more equitable HISD.

14. How will you address disparities in outcomes for Black, Latino, and high-need students?

Addressing disparities for Black, Latino, and high-need students begins with honesty: these inequities are rooted in decades of systemic racism. We must name these truths and commit to dismantling the barriers that limit opportunity.

I will start by requiring an independent audit of HISD spending to ensure transparency in per-student funding, staffing, and program allocations. With this data, I will push for a weighted student funding formula so dollars follow need, not neighborhoods. I will protect and expand special education and multilingual programs, while dedicating resources to high-needs campuses through retention incentives, differentiated pay, and strong mentoring for new teachers.

Equity also means supporting the whole child. I will advocate for wraparound services including mental health supports, after-school programs, and access to nutritious and delicious meals. This way students can thrive inside and outside the classroom. Finally, I will hold the district accountable by demanding clear reporting on whether investments are truly closing academic gaps. Every student deserves opportunity, dignity, and a school system that believes in their brilliance.

15. How can the board sustain gains in historically underperforming schools?

To sustain gains in historically underperforming schools, we must invest in people, not quick fixes. Students succeed when they have excellent teachers and school leaders who are supported, respected, and fairly compensated. I will push for strong mentoring, retention incentives, and professional autonomy so educators can focus on student needs rather than scripted lessons. We also need to expand wraparound supports such as mental health care, after-school programs, and family partnerships in order for students to come to class ready to learn. Sustaining progress means making equity a priority: directing resources through a weighted funding formula so schools with the highest needs get the strongest support. Finally, we must involve families and communities in decision-making.

Policy & Values

Please select your stance (Yes / Maybe / No) for each of the following:

YES • Support weighted funding based on campus needs, including extra funding for persistently failing schools.

YES • Support incentives to place top teachers/principals in highest-need schools.

MAYBE • Support bold school improvement decisions (e.g., restaffing, new calendars, reallocating funds).

BOTH/YES • As a trustee, should decisions prioritize your district, or the entire HISD student body?

MAYBE • Should bold action be taken for any school rated D/F for multiple years?

Statements of Belief

Please rank your agreement (1 = Strongly Disagree, 4 = Strongly Agree) on the following:

- 4 • Budget transparency is essential.
- 4 • Student data is key for goal setting and monitoring.
- 3 • All board decisions should prioritize student outcomes.
- 4 • Independent financial reviews should be regular.
- 4 • The district should explore vetted partnerships to improve school performance.
- 2 • Teachers/principals should be evaluated and compensated based on performance and student growth.
- 3 • Resources should address achievement gaps and expand access to quality pre-K.
- 3 • School boards should focus more on student outcomes than day-to-day operations.

OPTIONAL ELABORATION:

- I support bold school improvements decisions, if they are made with community input, are research-based, and led by qualified, experienced public education leaders. The “bold” improvements by HISD’s superintendent claims are destroying our schools and communities when he sees parents are naysayers, teaching as cookie-cutter, and 8000+ educators leaving as acceptable.
- A trustee’s responsibility is to serve all HISD students, not just those in their district. Every child deserves excellent schools, teachers, and resources. Simultaneously, I recognize that each district has its own unique challenges and strengths. I will listen closely to families and educators in my district so their needs are heard, while also making decisions with the well-being of the entire HISD community in mind. The success of one school cannot come at the expense of another; we rise together. I will advocate for equity, so historically underserved schools and communities get the support they need, while also ensuring district-wide policies lift up every student.
- Bold action is needed when a school has struggled for multiple years, but not the kind of “action” that reduces learning to test-prep drills or punishes educators. Letter grades from TEA often shift with cut scores or political agendas, so we must look beyond a single metric. True accountability means ensuring students graduate with critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and confidence, not just high-stakes test scores. Bold action should mean equipping administrators and teachers with sustained resources, smaller class sizes, mental health support, and enrichment opportunities that help every student develop in real-world learning.