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What do San Antonio ISD trustees want to see in their new superintendent?

Story by Noah Alcala Bach

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The San Antonio Independent School District is preparing to search for the leader who will replace retiring Superintendent Jaime Aquino.

The district's new superintendent will undoubtedly face challenges as the district deals with shrinking enrollment, a budget deficit and a tight timeline to turn around academically struggling campuses - or face state consequences.

If any San Antonio ISD campus earns five failing grades in a row from the state, the entire district is at risk of a Texas Education Agency takeover. District officials estimated last week that nearly one-third of all campuses could score a D or F this year.

"Let's keep an elected board that can represent the values of the community at all costs," longtime Trustee Ed Garza said at a Saturday board meeting. "Let's attract a superintendent that's not going to be here for six months or a year because TEA takes over the school district."

Trustees met over the weekend with an out-of-state consultant to discuss what they want in their next superintendent. The meeting comes just over a month after Aquino announced he will retire in January 2027. The outgoing district leader did not attend the meeting on Saturday.

Trustees developed a broad job description for the next district leader based on what they want that person to achieve. Those goals include providing rigorous academic curriculum to students, helping improve the academic performance at struggling schools and equipping kids with a skill set to help them thrive after graduation.

"What is our end goal? What do we want students to leave SAISD with?" Trustee Jacob Ramos said. "We want them to leave with... the knowledge, the resources or the skills to be successful in life, right? That is our end goal."

AJ Crabill, director of governance for the Washington D.C.-based consulting firm the Council of Great City Schools, led the discussion. The firm provides supports urban districts across the country in improving academic performance.

"What I often see boards do is they don't attend to what are our values in the community, and so they just hire whoever is the slickest-talking, shiniest suit-wearing candidate in the

bunch," Crabill said. "But then there's absolutely no alignment. You have frictions day one. I've watched that play out so many times. It's painful."

Crabill and the seven trustees outlined a framework that defines the top criteria for the next leader, including someone who reflects community values. Other top priorities include elevating students academic success over "adult comfort," high-quality professional development opportunities for teachers and someone who will enable the board to "exercise meaningful oversight."

Trustees also detailed directives for the next leader. They said the next superintendent should boost students' academic success, help students build self-efficacy, improve curriculum and turn around struggling campuses.

Trustee Garza, who previously served as a San Antonio mayor, called the process of selecting a new superintendent "twofold," emphasizing the need to balance community input with bold directives.

"Never let the state be a proxy for this community's vision of values. Your job will never be to represent the vision and values of the state," Crabill said. "Your job will never be to represent the vision value of the (federal government). Your job is to represent the vision and values of people in this community."

Trustee Christina Martinez echoed Garza's call to balance community voice and said that nearly a decade ago, when Superintendent Pedro Martinez led the district, the board passed measures to economically integrate schools and focused heavily on academic achievement. She questioned how much SAISD families might prioritize those measures.

"We often are in situations where school or community members are not really paying attention to academic performance because they love their school," she said. "For all kinds of other reasons, academic performance doesn't rise to the top all the time. For community, it's other things."

Martinez said that instead of focusing on academic performance, many SAISD families may put greater value on feeling welcome in their district and having a superintendent who speaks Spanish or looks like students. Others may want the district leader to have a good relationship with the teachers' union.

While academic performance and economic integration may not be top community priorities, both are important, she said.

SAISD, the city's third-largest district, represents San Antonio's urban core and serves about 42,000 students.

At the end of the meeting, Crabill encouraged board members to begin seeking input from constituents on the superintendent search. The search is the second SAISD has conducted since the pandemic.

Trustees hired Aquino in 2022 after Martinez left the district to lead Chicago Public Schools. At the time, Aquino was working as vice president of a digital content and curriculum company. He had previously held high ranking jobs at school systems in Los Angeles, Denver and Hartford, Connecticut.

On Monday, trustees are slated to pick a search firm that will help the board select SAISD's next superintendent.