LOOKING BEYOND THE AVERAGE:

Using Data to Ask Better Questions

September 2026

At Austin Public Schools, we are **preparing all learners to make a difference in the world.**

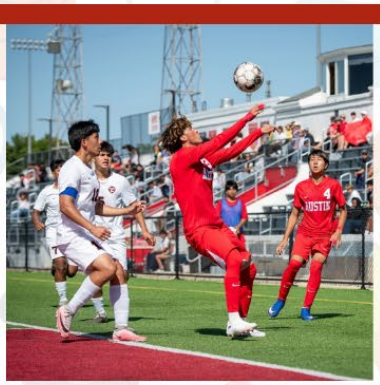












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INTRODUCTION

How should we measure a school district's success?

At first, it seems straightforward. We can look at graduation rates, test scores, attendance, student growth, spending, or other measures. We can compare Austin Public Schools with state averages, other school districts, or our own performance over time.

We do all of those things. But before drawing conclusions, we also need to be thoughtful about what comparisons actually tell us.

Consider two districts that each enroll approximately 5,000 students. They may appear comparable based on size alone. However, what if one serves significantly more English learners, more students experiencing economic hardship, more students receiving special education services, and a much more linguistically diverse community?

The districts may be similar in size while operating in very different contexts and serving students with very different needs. That does not mean we should judge outcomes differently. It means meaningful comparisons require us to understand who districts serve and the conditions in which they operate.

Our goal is not to find comparisons that make Austin look better or worse. Our goal is to find comparisons that help us ask better questions, learn from stronger results, and build on our own successes.

FINDING MEANINGFUL COMPARISONS

To better understand Austin's performance in context, we asked a different question: Which Minnesota school districts most closely match Austin Public Schools' student and community characteristics?

Before looking at outcomes or spending, we identified seven characteristics that help describe Austin's student population and community context. The chart below illustrates the criteria used.

PEER-DISTRICT CRITERION	THRESHOLD	APS
K-12 Enrollment	> 4,500	4,903
Free/Reduced-Price Meals	≥ 55%	57.4%
English Learners	> 20%	26.1%
Special Education	≥ 18%	19.0%
County Poverty Rate	> 8%	10.4%
Languages Spoken	≥ 20	43
Students of Color	≥ 50%	62.9%

Source: MDE , US Census Bureau

We then looked for Minnesota school districts that closely matched those characteristics.

Using those characteristics, St. Cloud Area School District and Saint Paul Public Schools emerged as Austin's closest peers. We also identified several "near-peers," districts that look very similar to Austin but fall outside one or more of the established measures.

Today, APS is serving over 5,000 PreK-12 students. Approximately 57.4% qualify for free or reduced-price meals, 26.1% are English Learners, and 19% receive special education services. Forty-three languages are spoken in our schools, and 62.9% of APS students are students of color.

None of these characteristics alone makes Austin unique. What is less common is this combination within a district of our size. That is why simple district-to-district comparisons can sometimes miss important context.

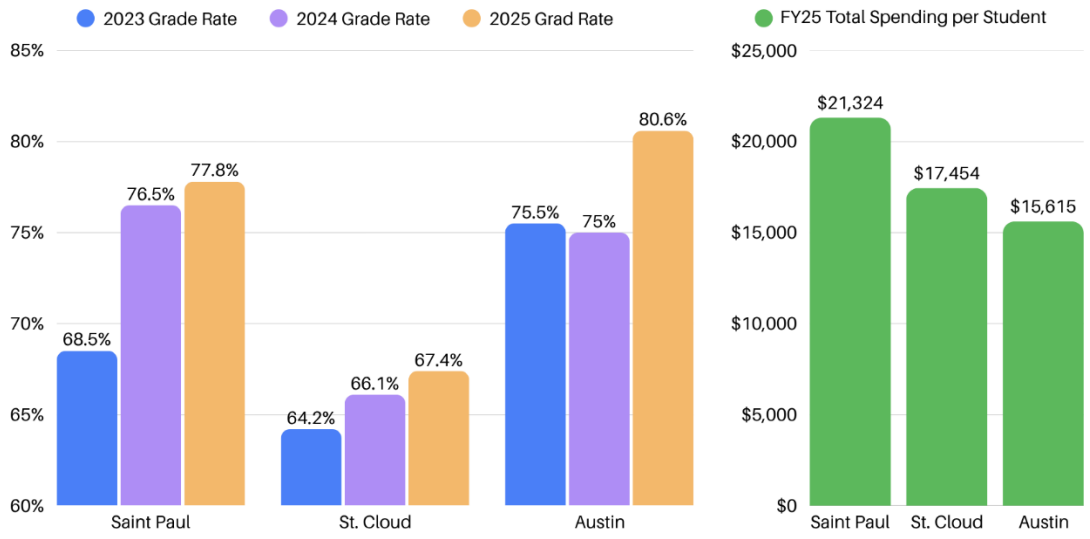
ADDING OUTCOMES AND RESOURCES

Once we established our peer group, we examined outcomes and resources. We did not use graduation rates and spending to identify peers. We reviewed those measures only after identifying comparable districts. We used four-year graduation rate as the primary outcome measure because it reflects an important cumulative result of a student's K-12 experience: successfully completing high school within four years. Like any single measure, graduation rate does not tell the whole story. Academic proficiency, growth, attendance, course completion, and other indicators also provide important information about student success.

Austin's four-year graduation rate reached 80.6% for the Class of 2025, up from 75.0% in 2024 and 75.5% in 2023. That improvement is encouraging and reflects progress, but it also reminds us that more work remains.

PRIMARY PEER COMPARISON

FY25 spending ordered from greatest to least



Source: MDE

Within this peer group, Austin reported the highest 2025 four-year graduation rate and the lowest FY25 spending per student.

Those results should not be interpreted as cause and effect. District expenditures vary for many reasons, including student needs, staffing, transportation, facilities, programming, enrollment, and available funding. No single spending figure explains outcomes, and no single outcome tells the whole story.

Resources are part of the picture. Meaningful comparisons consider who districts serve, the resources available to support students, and the outcomes they achieve.

What stands out most in this comparison is not a single number. It is the importance of looking at multiple measures together. Outcomes matter. Resources matter. Student and community context matter. Looking at all three provides a more complete understanding of district performance.

LOOKING AT NEAR-PEERS

Strict peer criteria help create a consistent comparison, but meaningful improvement requires looking beyond a single comparison group.

We also identified near-peers: districts that share many of Austin's characteristics but fall outside at least one established measure.

NEAR-PEER COMPARISON

FY25 spending ordered greatest to least

DISTRICT	WHY OUTSIDE STRICT PEER GROUP	2025 GRAD RATE	SPENDING
Minneapolis	FRL 53.6%	72.8%	$22,227
Burnsville-Eagan-Savage	County poverty below threshold	78.2%	$19,601
Robbinsdale	FRL 52.8%; EL 16.4%	77.5%	$19,528
North St. Paul - Maplewood - Oakdale	EL 19.5%	86.3%	$17,016
Willmar	Enrollment below 4,500	82.5%	$16,904
Austin	Meets all seven filters	80.6%	$15,615

Source: MDE

Near-peers broaden the conversation. They help us look beyond districts that closely mirror Austin and identify practices, strategies, and results worth examining.

Several near-peers produced graduation rates above Austin's in 2025. North St. Paul-Maplewood-Oakdale reported an 86.3% graduation rate, while Willmar reached 82.5%.

Those results deserve our attention and curiosity. Peers help us understand performance in context. A near-peer can highlight opportunities to learn from districts producing stronger results.

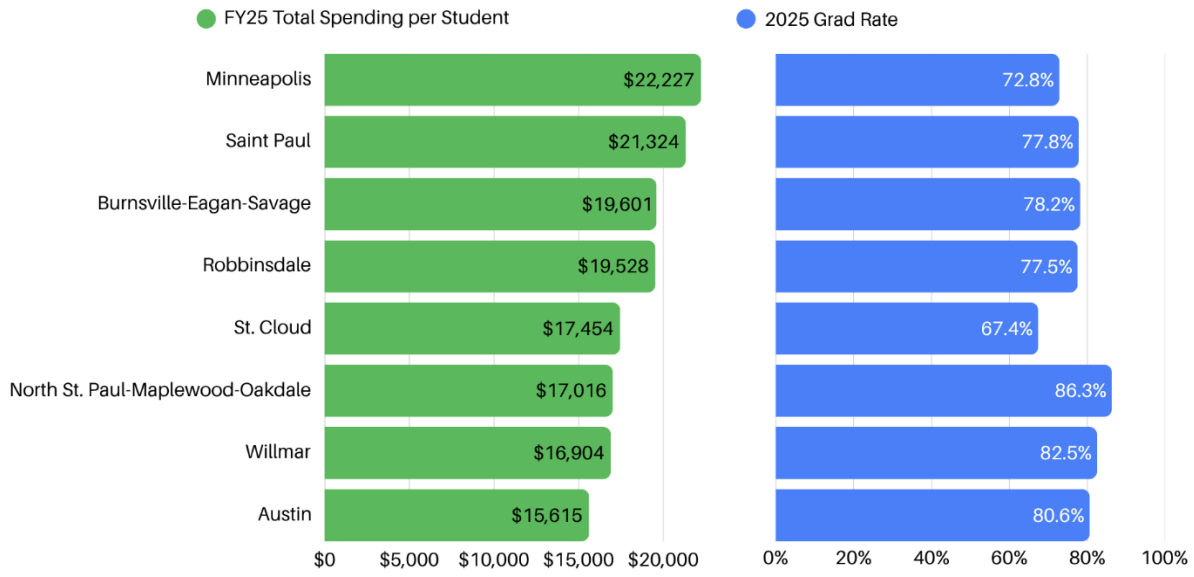
Comparison is not meant to explain away differences in performance. It is to identify them, understand them, and learn from them. Some near-peers outperform Austin on certain measures. Austin outperforms others on different measures. Both observations matter because they create opportunities to learn and improve.

A BROADER LOOK AT SPENDING

Looking across the peer and near-peer districts provides an additional perspective on how resources vary among districts serving similar students and communities.

FY25 TOTAL SPENDING PER STUDENT

Minnesota Department of Education data, greatest to least



Source: MDE

Among the eight districts included in this comparison, Austin reported the lowest FY25 total spending per student.

That is worth examining, but not oversimplifying. Student outcomes depend on many factors, including instructional practices, student needs, staffing, programming, community context, and available resources. Spending levels provide one piece of the picture, not the entire explanation.

Like any good data point, these results raise important questions rather than provide a complete answer.

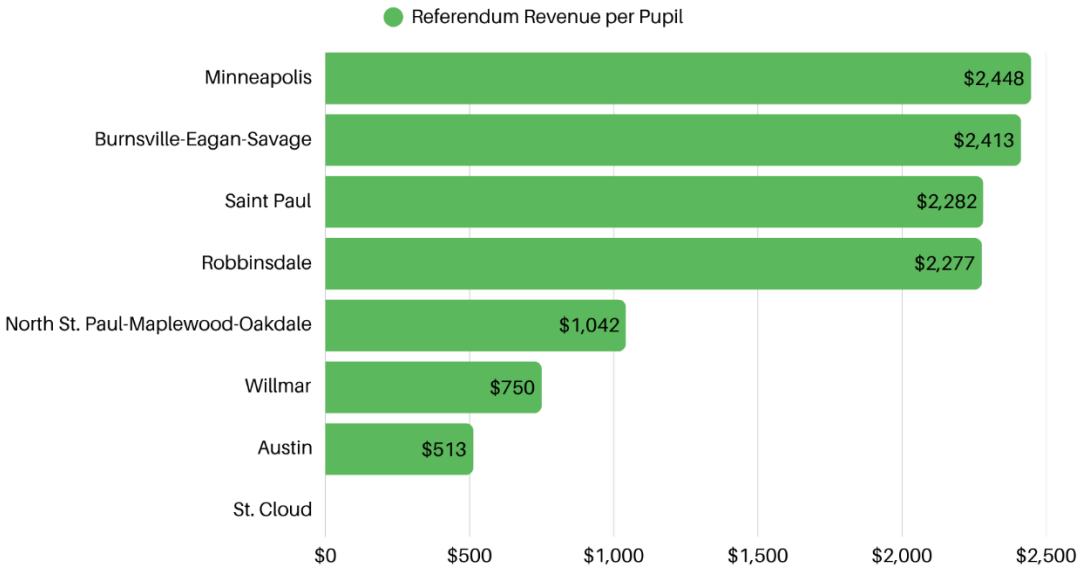
ANOTHER FINANCIAL LENS: LOCAL REFERENDUM RESOURCES

Another useful metric is the amount of locally approved revenue available to support district operations and facilities.

One reality across Minnesota is that school districts operate with very different levels of locally approved funding.

FY27 REFERENDUM REVENUE PER PUPIL

Greatest to least



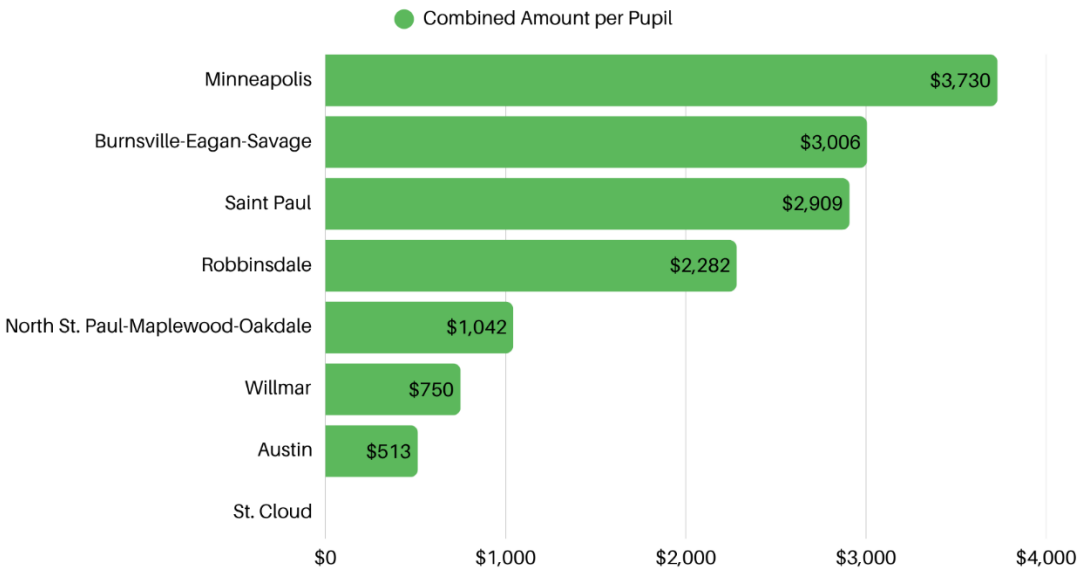
Source: PTMA Financial Network

Austin's $513 per pupil is the second-lowest referendum amount among these eight districts. Only St. Cloud is lower.

This comparison provides additional context about the financial resources available to districts serving many of the same student populations. The picture changes further when capital project levy revenue is included alongside referendum revenue.

FY27 REFERENDUM + CAPITAL PROJECT LEVY PER PUPIL

Greatest to least



Source: PTMA Financial Network

Austin does not have additional capital project levy revenue reflected in this comparison, so its combined amount remains $513 per pupil.

View these figures as context, not conclusions. Communities make different decisions based on local priorities, tax bases, facilities, programs, and needs. The comparison helps illustrate how available resources can vary substantially from one district to another

The data clearly show that districts serving similar students can operate with very different levels of local financial support.

ANOTHER LENS: ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

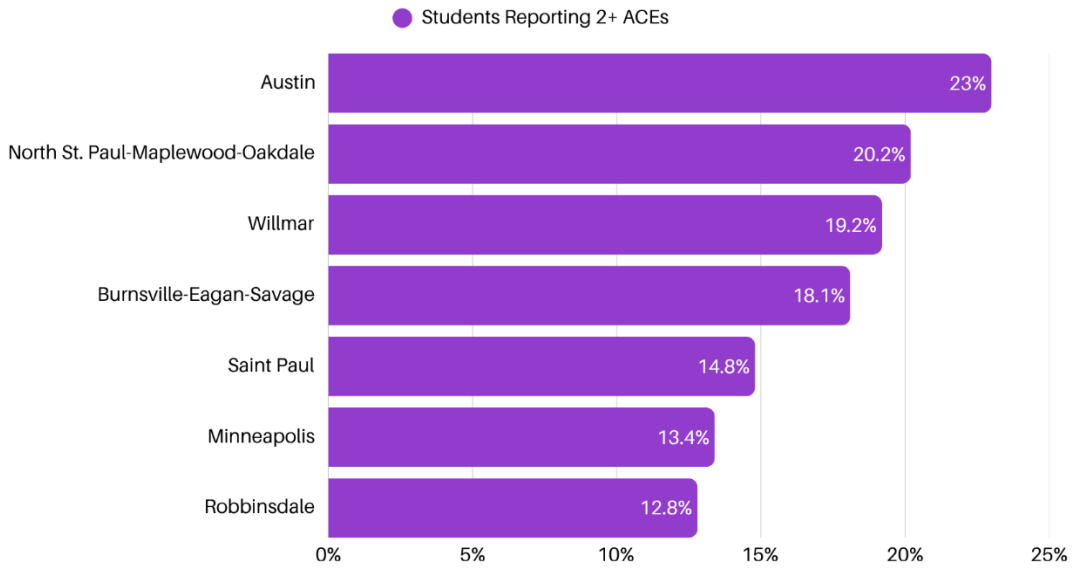
Student demographics and financial resources provide important context. Another important perspective comes from understanding the experiences students bring to school each day.

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are stressful events before age 18 that can affect future health and well-being. The Minnesota Department of Health's analysis includes experiences such as parental incarceration, substance misuse or mental health concerns in the household, emotional and physical abuse, domestic violence, and sexual abuse.

We did not use ACEs to identify Austin's peer or near-peer districts. We examined the 2025 Minnesota Student Survey data afterward as another independent measure of student context.

STUDENTS REPORTING TWO OR MORE ACES

2025 Minnesota Student Survey, greatest to least



Source: MDH

Among the districts compared, Austin had the highest reported percentage of students with two or more ACEs. Austin's report shows 9.3% reporting two ACEs, 6.6% reporting three, and 7.1% reporting four or more.

The same survey provides another measure of student need. In Austin, 6.4% of surveyed students reported skipping meals during the previous 30 days because their family did not have enough money to buy food. Among the districts compared, only Saint Paul reported a higher percentage (7.3%).

These results require caution. They are self-reported survey data, and the percentage of students who did not answer the ACE questions varies by district. They should not be interpreted as a ranking of which community experiences the most adversity. ACEs also do not define individual students or determine their futures.

These data can help us better understand the conditions students may experience and the factors schools can influence. The Minnesota Department of Health identifies protective factors such as positive relationships, safety, school engagement, community support, social

competence, and a sense of identity. Those are precisely the kinds of conditions schools work to strengthen every day.

That thinking connects directly to the work underway across Austin Public Schools. Whether the focus is instruction, collaborative teams, MTSS, BARR, attendance, grading practices, or coordinated student supports, the goal is the same: helping more students succeed and graduate with choices for their future.

The data provide context, not an excuse. They reinforce our responsibility to create conditions that help every student learn, connect, and succeed.

USING COMPARISON TO GET BETTER

It is easy to place Minnesota school districts into one aggregate, calculate an average, and draw a conclusion. Statewide data remain an essential benchmark.

Minnesota's four-year graduation rate reached 84.9% for the Class of 2025, which means Austin's 80.6% remains below the statewide result. That comparison matters and should remain part of how we evaluate our progress.

Effective improvement work requires us to hold several perspectives at once. We should compare Austin with Minnesota. We should compare ourselves with districts serving similar students and communities. We should examine resources. We should study near-peers and high-performing districts that may look different from Austin. And we should compare Austin with Austin, asking whether our students are achieving stronger outcomes over time.

Our demographics provide context. They do not lower our expectations.

When another district produces stronger outcomes, we should learn from it. When Austin produces stronger results, we should understand what is contributing to those results and work to make effective practices consistent throughout our system.

Our goal is not to find a comparison that makes Austin look good. Our goal is to use comparison to make Austin better.

Better comparison means looking at student demographics, community context, resources, outcomes, and performance over time together, rather than relying on any single number.

No single measure tells the whole story. Together, these measures give us a clearer understanding of the conditions districts are working under and better questions to ask about how resources, practices, and systems can improve student outcomes.

That keeps the focus where it belongs: Every Learner. Every Day.

Sincerely,

Dr. Joey Page, Superintendent

ABOUT THE ANALYSIS:

- We identified peer districts by matching districts against the seven established demographic and community filter criteria. Near-peers closely matched Austin but fell outside one or more criteria. We did not use graduation rates or spending to determine peer status.
- This analysis is intended to provide meaningful comparative context. It is not an exhaustive review of every Minnesota school district.
- FY25 total spending per student is from Minnesota Department of Education financial data.
- Graduation rates are four-year graduation rates.
- FY27 referendum and capital project levy amounts are based on Minnesota Department of Education data provided in the PTMA Financial Network comparison. This analysis is intended to provide meaningful comparative context and should not be interpreted as an exhaustive statewide research study. Regional differences in labor markets and operating costs may also contribute to spending variations among districts.