

Candidate Questionnaire for Austin ISD District 9 Runoff Election from Joslin Elementary

Members of Joslin Elementary's Campus Advisory Committee (CAC) Parent Teacher Association provided this questionnaire for Ms. Arati Singh and Ms. Carmen Tilton, the two candidates in the runoff election for District 9 Trustee for Austin ISD. The questions may be of interest to many in the Joslin community.

Joslin Elementary informed the candidates that their answers would be shared with families of students who attend Joslin Elementary School and other Friends of Joslin (members of neighborhood associations, local business owners, and other voters who actively support the interests of Joslin Elementary School and Joslin Park).

Early voting starts Nov. 29 and goes to Dec. 7. Election Day is Dec. 11.

Question 1: Please share your thoughts on the boundary change process in Austin ISD. Boundary changes are intended to help balance enrollment. Do you believe the process is working?

Arati Singh: The district does not currently have a boundary change policy in place when you have schools in Joslin's situation--where one school is hovering around 75% and an adjacent school (in this case, Sunset Valley) is near 100% capacity. In this case, increasing enrollment to Joslin appears to be the better option.

Carmen Tilton: I don't believe the process is working as well as it could be. The board and school administration have been thinking about boundaries in little pieces with a shift here or there. It's time for a district-wide comprehensive plan which looks at where people are moving, which programs are the most attractive, which school facilities are at what levels of capacity, and what transportation options are available to facilitate any realignment.

Moving boundaries is a challenging topic, and the AISD School Board has historically thrown money at the problem (expansion of crowded schools and perpetual support of severely under enrolled campuses) rather than engage in the politically fraught conversations. The District simply doesn't have the budget to continue to play the delay game much longer. With another year of declining enrollment across the city, its time to start the conversation.

Question 2: If elected, what policies would you support or propose to help schools, like Joslin, that currently hover around the 75 percent target capacity?

Arati Singh: Our small schools are treasures. But one downside is that having just a few families move out or transfer can have a big impact on the enrollment percentage.

The biggest threat to enrollment is that you lost a large chunk of students to Sunset Valley when boundaries were changed. That helped SV, but hurt Joslin.

On top of that, our district struggles with enrollment because Austin is just getting too expensive. Our families are moving out to Hays County, Manor, etc. because they cannot afford to live here.

Policies to help support schools like Joslin that hover around 75% that I would advocate would include:

- Formal exit interviews with families to see why they are leaving Joslin--so that we can see patterns and then create targeted solutions to keep more families from leaving.
- Tracking why students transferring TO Joslin are doing so--to develop marketing campaigns or expand programming that could bring even more families in.

- Targeted outreach to nearby campuses that are overcrowded
- Alignment with other schools in the vertical team to create feeder programs that might draw in more students. For example, the Austin HS vertical team offers Project Lead the Way at one of its feeder middle schools, and students can continue the program through high school.

You have a lot to be proud of with Joslin--from what I have heard, it is a strong, close-knit community. I have joined your PTA so I can stay in the loop, though unfortunately I have not had a chance to visit yet. (Though I plan to do so in the New Year, if elected!) I do not think it would be at high risk of closing simply because there are limited options to place Joslin students--Sunset Valley is already at capacity. Moreover, the district does not get state funds to transport students, and we value neighborhood schools--so transferring Joslin students elsewhere does not seem like an attractive option. As a trustee, I would do everything I could to listen, advocate, inform my fellow trustees about the value of small schools and the good work that is happening at Joslin, and be a thought partner in making changes that might attract/keep more families at Joslin.

Carmen Tilton: Mid-sized schools like Joslin are perfect for partnerships with other organizations and demonstration projects. I'd love to see Austin ISD take a little of its reserve money to invest in a handful of these campuses and then actively promote them as "premiere public schools." When I talk to parents who send their kids to private schools, nearly every person has said some variation of "I love that every educator at that school knows my kid, knows me, and we feel like a family." That small-school family is achievable within a public school setting, the district needs to promote it as such.

Question 3: If you were on the Joslin CAC, what strategies would you advocate to boost enrollment?

Arati Singh: See #2 above.

Carmen Tilton: I'd love to see more of our elementary schools incorporate a more natural science and outdoors-focused activities. Joslin is in a great location (decently large campus footprint for community garden, close to both neighborhood parks and green spaces). I'd work with the Austin Parks Department to see if we could do a joint project to take advantage of the Joslin neighborhood park just right next door.

I'd also start doing direct outreach to daycares and early childhood centers near by. Invite those parents and their young kids to see the school or sit in on a PTA meeting. Take the mystery out of enrollment and make them feel like part of the Joslin community. I'd also keep doing what you are doing by talking to nearby neighborhood associations. Parent-advocates are the best advertising a school has.

Question 4: In light of the financial challenges facing Austin ISD, do you believe that elementary schools with a current maximum capacity of less than 522 students should be consolidated? What role, if any, do you envision for small elementary schools in Austin ISD? If you had been on the Austin ISD School Board in 2017, would you have voted for or against the Campus Recognition for Excellence in Equity amendment to the Facility Master Plan? Why or why not?

Arati Singh: There are many factors that would go into consolidating or closing schools--school capacity might be one, but other factors to consider are the capacity of nearby "overflow" schools, demographic projections, etc. School performance might also factor into decision-making.

Carmen Tilton: Closing a school simply because of student enrollment numbers seems like a clunky solution to a much more nuanced problem. Not every parent wants to send their young student to a

large elementary school, and I think maintaining diverse school environment options for families will ultimately be a better long-term strategy for AISD.