

WestEd works to close economic and social gap for AISD community

Only 58% of economically disadvantaged students in Austin Independent School District performed academically at their grade level in the 2022-23 school year, according to the [Texas Academic Performance Reports](#).

AISD Academic Director Kaylin Brett said she noticed in the last three years that economically disadvantaged students, Black students and Latino students consistently received lower test scores. She said she wanted to work harder to mend the imbalances between areas of the district and groups on her high school campus.

"Our sole purpose in a school district is to serve students," Brett said, regarding an update on AISD's equity in a meeting on Feb. 22. "Closing gaps is one of those hard, hard things where gaps always exist, but they don't have to exist, right?"

Since fall 2023, AISD has supported a District Equity Assessment conducted by a third party, WestEd, a nonpartisan education research company. Researchers have aimed for the assessment to identify root causes to economic instability, student discipline and other inequities across the district. WestEd designed the initiative to connect the district to its schools by conducting focus groups and brainstorming resources to close the gaps.

The AISD Board of Trustees heard an update on the assessment in a voting session on Feb. 22 at its Board Auditorium.

At the meeting, WestEd researchers said they are in the midst of analyzing data from meeting with these focus groups. The researchers said they will then form a District Equity Team in 2024 to fully plan solutions, as well as to communicate with families when they reach conclusions.

Lynn Boswell, AISD trustee, said receiving updates on the assessment process is vital to involving the community in decision-making that will ultimately affect students' education.

"If we don't talk about it, it remains hidden, and we can't address it," Boswell said. "What we owe as a district is a strong education to every kid."

AISD first addressed inequity issues in 2016 through an [internal report](#) on economic disadvantages, student suspensions and gifted and talented participation.

According to the report, Black and Latino students made up about 12% of students enrolled in in-school suspension, compared to white students, who made up 2%.

Seventy percent of white students were enrolled in Advanced Placement programs, while only 29% of Black students and 41% of Latino students were, according to the 2016 report.

"It's a patchwork across our cities, and it happens in predictable ways," Boswell said. "Largely in our Eastern crescent ... where there are a lot of other social issues. The internal assessment was a starting point, not an ending point."

Jaya Kulkarni, an AISD senior, said she felt underrepresented as an Indian student on her campus because she was bullied about her culture. She said it's important for AISD to identify inequalities throughout the district to make her and other students feel safe at school.

"All students should be made to feel welcome in an environment that supports their success," Kulkarni said.

Results from the 2016 report led AISD to seek help from WestEd to investigate the causes of these inequities in three phases.

According to a WestEd [meeting agenda](#) from Feb. 5, researchers planned Phase I to analyze documents and conduct focus groups in fall 2023. Researchers aim for Phase II to form a District Equity Team to prioritize strategies that reflect the causes of inequity in 2024. Phase III will provide updates to the community on the progress, according to the WestEd researchers. The researchers said they plan to complete the initiative by the end of 2024.

Many formal plans have been made to address inequity by AISD, but they're not aligned or integrated across the district, a representative for WestEd said in the Feb. 5 agenda video.

Using WestEd to combat inequities creates credibility for the community and allows families to be involved in changes that will affect their students' education, Boswell said.

In order to align equity with the district's plan, Brett said her school convened a panel of students from a variety of backgrounds to meet with the principal monthly to discuss issues around the campus. Brett said it's vital to students' sense of belonging to bring them into difficult conversations.

"We make progress, but there's always work to be done on the topic," Brett said. "We want every single student to feel welcomed and feel like they have a space on our campus or in our district."

Kulkarni said she believes AISD has the power to create a safe space for students, and hopes for the progress of the equity assessment to help achieve this goal.

"I hope to see a fundamental shift towards an inclusive, safe and supportive educational environment," Kulkarni said. "Ultimately, school is to grow academically and personally and everyone deserves to have equal, equitable opportunities."