

Dunn & Castillo-Flores: Austin's school district should explore other uses for under-utilized facilities

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We all want the same thing for our children: access to the best opportunities that can secure their future success.

The Austin Independent School District Facility Master Plan Task Force community meetings made it clear that options other than closing campuses must be considered. Those options must protect the future health of Austin as a whole and its children's education.

One that warrants exploration is the proposal made by the East Austin College Prep Academy (EACPA), a tuition-free charter school in the heart of the Govalle/Johnston Terrace neighborhood in East Austin. Under that proposal, the Austin school district would allow EACPA to lease Eastside Memorial High School.

The Eastside campus has been an under-performing and under-utilized school for a decade and has an annual operating budget of \$8.2 million. On the other hand, EACPA has a charter with the Texas Education Agency that extends through high school. If the Austin district allows EACPA to lease the campus, then within a few years the community would have access to a middle and high school in East Austin. The district would save millions each year that it could use to avoid having to close state-ranked recognized and exemplary schools.

It is an excellent opportunity for collaboration in the best interest of the community. During the last legislative session, the Senate Education Committee examined the issue of charter schools and issued specific recommendations for the current session. Among other recommendations, the panel stressed that Texas should "provide charter schools with greater access to existing public school facilities with vacant or unused facilities."

Since charter schools were created by the Legislature in 1995, they have grown from 66 campuses to 460 campuses this school year. As the number of campuses grows, enrollment is increasing. Today 120,000 students are attending charter schools in Texas.

Austin has the opportunity to serve as an example of cooperation and teamwork in public education. EACPA's plan offers the Austin district with the opportunity to keep good schools open and provides access to a good school to a community that needs one. In the end, it could be a huge win for all Austin students.

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