

EDUCATION

Ambitious SAISD Reforms Not Without ‘Bumps Along the Road’



BEKAH MCNEEL

AUGUST 25, 2017



SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT

San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel President Shelley Potter addresses the SAISD Board of Trustees.

UPDATED AUGUST 25, 2017

As any doctor will tell you, the road to recovery is not always a straight line. In the most dire cases, it may take a few tries before a cure is found. The same could be said of school turnaround, the very difficult task facing [San Antonio ISD](http://www.saisd.net/main/) (<http://www.saisd.net/main/>) Superintendent Pedro Martinez as he enters his third year at the helm of the district.

“We’ve been an underperforming district for at least two decades,” Martinez said. When standards were lower, problems were masked. As State tests more accurately reflect the knowledge required to be “college-ready,” SAISD scores have fallen, along with many others across Texas.

Now, with a more accurate understanding of the district's shortcomings, Martinez is prepared to place his thumb on two hot button issues in public education: charter schools and teacher salaries.

Welcoming Charter Operators Into the District

The lowest performing SAISD campuses were already out of compliance with State standards when Martinez was hired. Two, Irving Middle School and Stewart Elementary, have failed to meet State standards for the past five years. Four more – Tafolla Middle School, Ogden Elementary, Rodriguez Elementary, and Miller Academy – have failed to meet those standards for four years. The State allows up to three years of “improvement required” status before it begins to consider serious interventions. Now, without improvements, Martinez said, the district has limited options for the future of their six most troubled campuses. Closure is one option. Irving will be redesigned to become an academy, a structural change significant enough that it will technically count as a closure, Martinez explained.

Another option is to bring in open enrollment charter operators as in-district charters.

Open enrollment charters like KIPP (<http://www.kipp.org/>), Great Hearts (<http://www.greatheartsamerica.org/>), and IDEA Public Schools (<http://www.ideapublicschools.org/>) are independently run by charter management organizations that can be for-profit or nonprofit. They receive less money than traditional public schools from the State and often hire teachers on an at-will basis, along with other key differences.

In-district charters are run by school districts, but have applied to the State for special status that allows them to make changes to school structure and curriculum.

The turnaround option allows a school district to hire an open enrollment charter management organization to run an in-district charter. Enrollment and employment are subject to district policies, while curriculum and school structure are shaped by the charter.

Ogden Elementary is one such school. Partnering with Relay Graduate School (<https://www.relay.edu/>), Ogden has become a lab school with 25 master teachers (<https://therivardreport.com/saisd-hopes-to-attract-master-teachers-with-15000-bonuses/>) and 22 resident teachers pursuing advanced degrees. While Martinez expects to see improvements from the lab school initiative alone, it will not change the status of the school. Eventually, Ogden will become an in-district charter school run by a new charter management organization. The teachers will still be SAISD employees, and there will be no disruption to enrollment as it makes the transition. Children will still come from the neighborhood, and none will be asked to re-enroll. “The families won’t see any difference, except a better experience,” Martinez said.



SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT

SAISD Board Trustees (from left) President Patti Radle, Superintendent Pedro Martinez, Debra Guerrero (D3), and James Howard (D2).

Once the charter management organization is in place, Ogden's accountability clock gets reset, Martinez explained.

For those campuses with the most urgent needs – those in their fourth and fifth years of noncompliance – Martinez and his team are looking at a variety of other options afforded by partnerships with charter operators.

"We're going to figure out what is the right fit for each neighborhood," Martinez said.

Read more: [SAISD Partners with Special Ed Charter to Create Brewer Academy](https://therivardreport.com/saisd-partners-with-special-ed-charter-to-create-brewer-academy/)
(<https://therivardreport.com/saisd-partners-with-special-ed-charter-to-create-brewer-academy/>)

SAISD has also entered a partnership with [John H. Wood Charter Network](http://www.woodcharter.com/) (<http://www.woodcharter.com/>) to improve services to students with social and emotional learning specialties.

In addition to those most urgent campuses, Martinez is looking at campuses moving along that same trajectory. A total of 19 schools did not meet standard last year. Another 18 or 19 passed, but their scores showed a downward trajectory that does not bode well for the future. Martinez wants to look at all of those schools to develop improvement plans. He hopes that the master teacher initiative will be the key.

Creating Space in the Pay Scale for Master Teachers

Martinez plans to observe master teachers this year at Ogden and assess how effective they are at making strides with student performance before the Relay charter management company is in place. He wants to see if these teachers could make a difference in borderline performance schools.

Master teachers will be expected to work more hours and demonstrate more ambitious student growth markers. They also will be paid more, using money from the district's \$46 million

Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grant. The magnitude of the grant allowed a much larger scope for the master teacher program sooner than anticipated, funding 285 master teacher positions for the 2017-18 school year.

The speed of the rollout worried the [San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel](http://www.sanantonioalliance.org/). (<http://www.sanantonioalliance.org/>)

“One of our initial concerns was expanding what was a pilot...so rapidly,” Alliance President Shelley Potter said. “Would that create the best environment for it to be successful?”



SCOTT BALL / RIVARD REPORT

San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel President Shelley Potter addresses the SAISD Board of Trustees.

The goal – to put the highest performing teachers in the areas of highest need – which “makes a whole lot of sense,” is in danger of being lost, Potter said. With a glut of master teachers left to individual principals to assign, she has heard that many are being used outside the neediest classrooms.

Another concern is how the pay increases will be allocated. Martinez indicated early in discussions with the Alliance that the salaries would not be based on student test scores, known as “merit pay.” Potter, like other critics of the practice, claims that merit systems create classes of teachers and breed competition where cooperation would better benefit students.

Martinez avoided a merit pay system by tying the additional compensation to additional hours worked. Every teacher in Texas is required to teach 75,600 minutes (file:///Users/bekahmcneel/Downloads/House_Bill_2610FAQv_6.pdf), or 1,260 hours, per year.

“I believe, first of all, that if we ask teachers to teach more than those minutes then we should pay them for it,” Martinez said.

There is one small catch, of course. To continue to be eligible for those extra hours, year after year, teachers must prove to be effective. The question, one Martinez hopes to work out with the Alliance, is how that effectiveness should be measured.

Potter also claims that Martinez initially planned to pay out-of-district recruits more, in order to match their salaries in districts with higher pay scales.

“For teachers in our district who have been committed and loyal to our students and our families, the idea that the district would pay people from outside the district more money to come here was not well-received,” Potter said. Of the 285 master teachers, 50 are from outside the district.

While she thought there had been an agreement to stick exclusively to the SAISD pay scale, Martinez revealed during a recent meeting that SAISD would be matching the higher salaries of 16 out-of-district recruits.

“In recruiting for these critical positions we made the decision to match a salary, up to \$5,000 more [than SAISD’s pay scale]. The increase for 16 teachers varied by teacher, but totaled \$23,000 for the district,” SAISD spokeswoman Leslie Price said. The average increase was \$1,469, and the largest was \$3,500, she added.

While the salary discrepancy is not significant to some within the district, Potter says the cost is more than just dollars and cents. “That’s a huge price to pay if you have 235 of your highest quality internal teachers feeling like they are not as highly valued.”

Potter addressed the SAISD board on Monday to protest out-of-district salaries.

“We spoke against this concept because of the message sent,” Potter said during the citizens to be heard portion of the meeting.

Along with questions over pay, various administrative and clerical issues remain to be worked out, SAISD teacher Amy Hestilow said at the Aug. 21 board meeting.

“Always when rolling out new programs there are bumps along the road,” Hestilow said. She thanked the administration for addressing some of her concerns already, but said that she wished issues of accountability and scheduling had been smoothed out before the school year started.

“It’s a juggling act that makes it difficult to focus on our students,” she explained.

Martinez acknowledged the gaps that still need to be filled and said he hopes teachers will work with the district to find solutions. Potter encouraged Alliance members to apply for the master teacher program in order to help shape it and set it up to succeed.

“Our children need this program,” Potter said.

On that she and Martinez agree.

Nationally, superintendents and teachers unions are famously at odds over issues of compensation and accountability. Because Texas is a right-to-work state with limits on union power, such power struggles are more subtle. However, for SAISD to make necessary changes, it will require trust on both sides. While neither Potter nor Martinez are publicly critical of each another, perceived tension between teachers and administration could stymie needed changes in the district. Keeping their members and deputies operating in good faith with one another may be one of the keys to the future of SAISD.

Correction: Relay Graduate School will not be the charter management organization involved in the Ogden Elementary turnaround, as an earlier draft stated.

Disclosure: Great Hearts is a Rivard Report business member. For a full list of supporters, click [here](https://therivardreport.com/business-members/).
