

January 16, 2006

Dear Superintendent Forgione and Members of the AISD Board:

The Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association strongly urges the Austin Independent School District to retain Becker Elementary School as an elementary school. We request that, at a minimum, the AISD adopt a longer timeframe than one month to consider the consequences of converting Becker from an elementary school into a pre-kindergarten center. We are concerned at the lack of community input that has characterized this proposal, as we would have expected the school district to conduct extensive discussions with the neighborhood and to solicit community feedback prior to beginning formal consideration of a transition of this magnitude. Please take the time now to explore with the community both the area's changing demographics as well as options for increasing the number of school-aged children who attend Becker.

While current enrollment falls below the school's stated capacity of 550, the neighborhood's demographics are changing in ways that should increase future enrollment. A recent City of Austin survey—"Comparative Neighborhoods Data Program: Housing Stock Expansion, Population Growth and Density"—reveals several important trends that AISD should consider. Bouldin Creek ranks in the top 20 of 62 Austin neighborhoods in terms of percent growth over the last five years. The Bouldin Creek neighborhood population has increased by 511 people since 2000, for a total expansion of nine percent. Anecdotal evidence and visual observations suggest that individuals moving into Bouldin Creek are young married professionals starting families, and we believe actual data will bear out the conclusion that the neighborhood can anticipate a significant increase in school-aged children within the next five years.

Additionally, while City of Austin planners and Envision Central Texas emphasize urban residential infill as a remedy to the city's growing traffic and sprawl problems, abandoning a key component of the new urban vision of compact, self-contained, non-auto-dependent neighborhoods—which Bouldin and Becker have long exemplified—seems particularly contraindicative of this urban planning objective.

The Bouldin Creek Neighborhood Association encourages AISD to take more time to explore other options for increasing enrollment at Becker Elementary. Becker Elementary has educated Bouldin residents for more than seventy years, and families who send children to the school praise the quality of the education. The school may not need to operate at total maximum capacity to fulfill its mission of providing an educational environment in which all children can be successful, and we would suggest that AISD weigh other factors before determining Becker's fate. As a neighborhood school with a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students—nearly 90 percent—maintaining a slightly lower-than-average enrollment may provide an ideal learning environment for Bouldin Creek's diverse population.

We urge AISD to develop a longer decision-making timeframe, and to involve members of the community in the process. The timing of the announcement, the Friday afternoon before a three-day weekend, has left little opportunity for information exchange or gathering prior to the school board's special meeting. And while we appreciate that the district has scheduled a meeting on January 19 to discuss this issue, without even a week's notice, we fear that many residents will be unable to attend and express their opinions about this proposed change.

Additional research will, we believe, emphasize the important and necessary role Becker Elementary serves and will continue to serve as an increasing number of school-aged children move to this area. Communities need strong schools to remain vital and healthy. We urge you to open a dialogue with the community about how to strengthen Becker Elementary before setting on a course that promises to have a huge impact on the educational experience of Bouldin Creek children.

Sincerely,

Kathryne Tovo, President