



August 13, 2024

The Honorable Matias Segura  
Superintendent  
Austin Independent School District

**Via E-Mail**

Dear Superintendent Segura:

We, the undersigned education justice advocacy organizations, write with grave concerns about the Austin Independent School District's current budget shortfall. As advocates who work to ensure every child is safe in school, particularly those who have been historically underserved, we are surprised that an examination of the multi-million dollar budget of the Austin Independent School District Police Department has not come into focus in the past few months. It is troubling that central office staff members, academic resources, and essential programs are on the chopping block - yet, to our knowledge, there has been no mention of diminishing the district's school police budget.<sup>1</sup> A number of us voiced similar concerns in the spring of 2022, and the urgency of this demand has not abated. Sonya Massey lost her life at the hands of the police last month, and such a horrific incident is embedded in the consciousness of young Black and Brown Texans as they return to school.<sup>2</sup> In our work with young people, we consistently hear them tie the reality of school police officers, as well as the tragedies that took the lives of Sonya Massey and George Floyd, to the racist origins of American policing.

In our letter two years ago, we highlighted that Austin ISD is well known for its progressive education initiatives. Four and a half years into the pandemic, the impact of this

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<sup>1</sup> Brant Bingamon, *Even With Tax Increase, Austin ISD Will Need Significant Spending Cuts*, [Austin Chronicle](https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2024-08-02/even-with-tax-increase-austin-isd-will-need-significant-spending-cuts/), August 2, 2024, available at <https://www.austinchronicle.com/news/2024-08-02/even-with-tax-increase-austin-isd-will-need-significant-spending-cuts/> (last visited on August 13, 2024)

<sup>2</sup> John O'Connor, *Bodycam video reveals chaotic scene of deputy fatally shooting Sonya Massey, who called 911 for help*, [AP News](https://apnews.com/article/illinois-police-shooting-911-murder-7a1b433183933ca94f266c0f90753a33), July 22, 2024, available at <https://apnews.com/article/illinois-police-shooting-911-murder-7a1b433183933ca94f266c0f90753a33> (last visited on August 13, 2024)



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global health crisis on young learners is a ubiquitous concern across America.<sup>3</sup> Even with the armed security officer mandate created by HB 3 in 2023, Austin ISD can take drastic and bold steps to turn away from the notion that school policing is synonymous with school safety.<sup>4</sup>

During meetings of the Austin ISD School Safety and Security Committee last year, the financial strain of HB 3 consistently emerged.<sup>5</sup> Particularly for the middle schools and high schools within Austin ISD, reducing the number of school police officers on each campus - to the minimum number required by state law - would make room in the budget and improve morale across the district. According to federal data from the 2020-21 academic year, Black and Hispanic children received a disproportionate number of referrals to law enforcement in Austin ISD; Black children accounted for 6.7% of district enrollment that year, yet they comprised 16.9% of the referrals to law enforcement in the district; Hispanic children accounted for 55.7% of district enrollment that year, yet they comprised 57% of the referrals to law enforcement in the district.<sup>6</sup>

According to the district's website, \$290,000 flowed from the American Rescue Plan to the Austin ISD Police Department.<sup>7</sup> This line item continues to be funded as critical services within the district suffer. Moreover, the website conveys that a beginning police officer for Austin ISD can expect to receive an annual salary of \$51,928 to \$63,329.<sup>8</sup> That salary range stands in contrast to the \$55,844 that a new teacher in Austin ISD could expect during the 2023-24 academic year.<sup>9</sup> When that base salary range is applied to the 82 full-time police officers employed by Austin ISD - and is considered alongside the fact that there are at least two police

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Claire Cain Miller and Sarah Mervosh, *The Youngest Pandemic Children Are Now in School, and Struggling*, *The New York Times*, July 1, 2024, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/07/01/upshot/pandemic-children-school-performance.html> (last visited on August 13, 2024)

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Hairston and Hannah Friedman, *Opinion: school policing is not school safety*, *Austin American-Statesman*, September 3, 2023, available at <https://www.statesman.com/story/opinion/columns/your-voice/2023/09/03/opinion-school-policing-is-not-school-safety/70711909007/> (last visited on August 13, 2024)

<sup>5</sup> See [https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dept/sssc/SSSC\\_Minutes\\_20230822.pdf](https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dept/sssc/SSSC_Minutes_20230822.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> See [https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/profile/us/tx/austin\\_isd?surveyYear=2020&nces=4808940](https://civilrightsdata.ed.gov/profile/us/tx/austin_isd?surveyYear=2020&nces=4808940)

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.austinisd.org/esser>

<sup>8</sup> See

[https://www.austinisd.org/police/recruitment#:~:text=Benefits%20%26%20Pay%20Scale&text=Police%20Officer%20%20\(0%2D2.ranging%20from%20%2451%2C928%20to%20%2463%2C329.04\).](https://www.austinisd.org/police/recruitment#:~:text=Benefits%20%26%20Pay%20Scale&text=Police%20Officer%20%20(0%2D2.ranging%20from%20%2451%2C928%20to%20%2463%2C329.04).)

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.austinisd.org/hc/careers>



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officers at every high school campus in Austin ISD - it becomes clear where cuts can be made to weather this current budget crisis.<sup>10</sup>

A number of our organizations also sent a letter to Commissioner Mike Morath of the Texas Education Agency in 2022; in that correspondence, we highlighted that the state should tap into available federal resources to increase the number of psychologists, social workers, and counselors in school districts across the state.<sup>11</sup> Especially during a time filled with budget constraints, we urge you to collaborate with the Texas Education Agency and the federal government as frequently as possible to strengthen the number of mental health professionals available to various constituents within Austin ISD.

As the nation commemorated the 70th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* in May, it did so with the recognition that school safety and school climate policies so often fail Black & Brown children, LGBTQ young people, and kids with disabilities. This unique juncture in history presents a critical opportunity to turn away from the business-as-usual practice that is untouched school police budgets in times of crisis. Students, parents, and educators within Austin ISD deserve a fully-funded central office, robust academic resources, restorative justice programs, and initiatives to address the lasting harms of the pandemic - not static and ever-growing school police budgets.

We thank you for your service and invite you to contact us as this budget conversation continues.

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<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.austinisd.org/police>

<sup>11</sup>

<https://www.texasappleseed.org/sites/default/files/2023-05/ej-coalition-letter-white-house-mental-health-fact-sheet-final.pdf>



Sincerely,

Austin Justice Coalition  
Texas Appleseed  
Measure  
Coalition of Texans with Disabilities  
Texas Center for Justice & Equity  
Girls Empowerment Network  
The Arc of Texas  
Intercultural Development Research Association  
Dr. Chantal A. Hailey, Educator and Researcher

Encl.

cc: Austin ISD Board of Trustees (*via email*)