

Statesman

Austin leaders push school district to support immigrant families

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By [Melissa B. Taboada](#) - American-Statesman Staff 6:06 p.m. Wednesday, February 15, 2017



Ken Zarifis, Education Austin president, speaks at a press conference held outside Lanier High School on Wednesday. Education Austin held the press conference to show support for immigrant and refugee students.

Highlights

Various community leaders called on the Austin district to take a stronger stand for undocumented students.

While 3 trustees have called publicly for more support on campus for immigrant students, others not so sure.

Austin school district trustees on Monday night will determine what kind of statement or [resolution they will make regarding support for students who are unauthorized immigrants](#).

Trustees also asked for Superintendent Paul Cruz to provide an update on what the district has done in providing information regarding immigration support and services to students, their

Statesman

families and campuses. They also want to have the district's legal counsel and law enforcement officials attend so they can get clarifications on any legal issues.

Since late last week, Cruz has met with campus leaders and put out resources available to refugee and immigrant students. However, labor group Education Austin as well as various city and community leaders Wednesday morning called on the Austin school district, and specifically Cruz, to [take a stronger stand](#).

The call came a day after a handful of principals, having received an email from the district's legal counsel, [prohibited teachers and campus staff from distributing materials](#) to students detailing what to do if immigration enforcement officials show up at their home or try to question them.

Teachers at several campuses last week provided such information to students, [as word spread of an immigration enforcement operation in Austin](#). Education Austin provided its 3,000 members with various documents, including a United We Dream flier titled "What to do if ICE comes to your door," referring to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Bill Beardall, executive director of the Equal Justice Center, said at Wednesday morning's press conference that the district was being overly cautious in tamping down such activity on campus, and failing to give students and their families valuable information that advises them of their rights.

Trustees Jayme Mathias, Paul Saldaña and Ann Teich all attended the press conference outside of Lanier High School and spoke in support of immigrant and undocumented students. Various community leaders and politicians attended, including state Rep. Gina Hinojosa, D-Austin, who is a former school trustee, and City Council Member Greg Casar.

"We are in a difficult position for our students, our families and our staff," Teich said. "Many of our immigrant students are operating in and out of school in an atmosphere of fear. Their learning is impacted because of this fear. ... I believe it is the responsibility of trustees and all of our staff to ensure our students and their families are equipped with the information that combats bullying, hate and fear."

A few hours later, the trustees met with administrators for a routine operations meeting, where they discussed adopting a resolution supporting immigrant students and their families.

Saldaña said by not addressing the issue sooner, the district and board created "the perception by the immigrant community that we don't care."

Other trustees were comfortable with the directive from the district's legal counsel.

Trustee Julie Cowan suggested that Education Austin, which held a training last weekend that drew 250 educators wanting advice on ways to address immigration rights with their students, hold such meetings in the future at local churches, instead of on school campuses.

Statesman

“We are in a really uncharted territory right now because we’ve also received emails from constituents in AISD who want to make sure we’re not overstepping our legal bounds, whatever that may be,” Cowan said.

Cruz said that during the time Education Austin was holding its press conference, he was meeting with campus principals to answer their questions.

Cruz said he didn’t want others speaking on behalf of the district, its leadership or the school board.

“We support all of our kids, as we have done today and as we are going to do tomorrow,” he said. “Absolutely we will. So if it hasn’t been clear, it’s always good to level-set again. We absolutely support all of our kids, a safe learning environment for all of our youngsters. That includes all of our staff and our parents, as well.”

Federal law requires schools to educate students, regardless of their immigration status. But the labor group has pushed the district to do more to show support after an [Austin valedictorian experienced backlash for declaring her immigration status](#) in a tweet that went viral last year. It’s unclear how many undocumented students are in the Austin district, but the district serves about 1,000 refugees and about 30,000 English language learners.