

Opinion: Midland needs healthy public schools; Midland needs this bond

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There’s a trick to getting down the school stairs at San Jacinto Junior High safely, according to my seventh-grader. You try to get a spot on the side, close to the handrail. You don’t actually hold the handrail -- that could slow you down. But hopefully you manage to keep your hand hovering above it so it’s there to grab in the event that you don’t keep your footing and you get shoved forward by the press of 12- and 13-year-olds rushing to their next class.

I confess I thought she was exaggerating; but I was once in the school halls during a passing period, and it reminded me of the Beijing subway I used to ride during rush hour. The building — like our other secondary campuses — is not suited for the number of students it holds each day.

The anti-bond folks call for accountability, leveraging the improved facilities our children need as a bargaining chip, but they don’t specifically enumerate what would satisfy them. Might it be public documentation of the district’s academic goals, and their progress toward meeting them, posted in a place where all can see and ask questions about both successful outcomes and failures? Turns out the district recently made that **public**.

Midland ISD Strategic Plan Score Card								
Board Goal	Themes	Success Metric	Baseline	Yearly Targets				
			2023	2024	2025	2026	2027	2028
1-5	SE	% pre-k students proficient or above on emergent literacy	82%	87%	88%	90%	91%	92%
1-5	SE	% of students kindergarten ready by start of kindergarten	37%	60%	62%	64%	66%	68%
1-3	SE	% of students meeting reading STAAR annual growth	51%	56%	60%	80%	81%	82%
2-4	SE	% of students meeting math STAAR annual growth	55%	60%	64%	80%	81%	82%
1	SE	% of Gr. 3 students on/above grade level per STAAR reading	40%	42%	44%	50%	52%	55%
2	SE	% of Gr. 3 students on/above grade level per STAAR math	36%	38%	40%	45%	48%	50%
3-4	SE	% of Gr. 7 students on/above grade level per STAAR reading	48%	49%	50%	51%	52%	53%
3-4	SE	% of Gr. 7 students on/above grade level per STAAR math	21%	24%	27%	30%	33%	35%
5	SE	% of students scoring at the meets level on Eng I STAAR EOC	41%	44%	47%	50%	52%	54%
5	SE	% of students scoring at the meets level on Eng II STAAR EOC	42%	45%	48%	51%	53%	56%
5	SE	% of first time testers scoring at the meets level on Alg I STAAR	43%	45%	47%	49%	50%	51%
5	SE	% of Yr 1 Gr. 9 students earning Alg 1 credit by the end of Gr. 9	87%	88%	89%	90%	91%	92%
5	SE	# of National Merit Qualifiers	2	2	4	8	12	15
5	SE	% of students earning 6 credits by the end of hte 9th grade	87%	88%	89%	90%	91%	92%
5	SE	% of students in Fine Arts in grades 7-12	24%	26%	28%	30%	32%	34%
1-5	SE	% of STAAR tetedd areas that are at or above state average	8%	20%	25%	35%	45%	55%
1-5	SE	% of students in A/B rated schools	14%	20%	25%	30%	50%	70%
1-2	SE	# of PK seats	1167	1175	1250	1325	1400	2667
1-2	SE	% of eligible population enrolled in PK-3	5%	6%	7%	10%	20%	30%
1-2	SE	% of eligible population enrolled in PK-4	67%	71%	74%	77%	79%	80%
5	SE	% of graduates meeting College, Career, or Military Readiness	52%	72%	75%	79%	84%	88%
5	SE	% of graduates enrolling in college the fall semester after	45%	48%	51%	54%	57%	60%
5	SE	% of EcoDis and Non EcoDis Students Meeting Outcome Bonus	2%	4%	6%	8%	10%	12%
1-5	SE	Annual student attendance rate	93.3	93.5	93.7	93.9	94.5	95

It's no secret that Midland has struggled with academic performance for years, following the same dismal trends as state and national data. But in Midland, our current school administration is no longer making excuses or pretending it isn't an issue.

Those against the bond are certainly right that too many of our schools are failing, and, like them, I don't think that new facilities will be a magic bullet to fix that. But, interestingly enough, I don't hear the current MISD administration making that claim either.

Instead, I see them treating facility needs as one component of a robust response to an educational crisis that needs attention from multiple angles in order to correct. Since Dr. Howard came to town, I've watched her and her team get to work addressing discipline, filling teacher vacancies, improving reading instruction, providing high quality instructional materials, and bringing back centralized oversight and guidance on subject matter instruction.

None of these changes will result in overnight success, and they are not without growing pains: for example, the resources that might equip an inexperienced teacher could feel crippling to a master teacher accustomed to autonomy. But for those who are looking for it, there's evidence that our leaders recognize our educational emergency, and they are getting to work. One thing they need from us in order to do their jobs is for us to address our facility issues.

My children have always been MISD students, but with my eldest entering middle school this year, our family's journey into MISD secondary is only just beginning. And suddenly I'm seeing what everyone has been telling me was coming: the classrooms without enough seats on the first day of school, the bathrooms that don't work, the old doors that might not lock properly in the event of a campus shelter-in-place. After a recent rainstorm, my daughter's teacher had to move bookshelves of materials out of the way of drippy and sagging ceiling tiles. "Facility needs" can sound like a luxury good when you only know the halls of your elementary school; but they slap you in the face when you see the unmet needs at the secondary level.

Like many Midlanders, I wish this bond package were smaller. I wish we'd consider the merits of a third comprehensive high school instead of bleeding purple and maroon till our dying gasps. I wish the bond committee — of which I was a part — had felt more collaborative.

But more than anything, I wish we'd stop kicking the can. All wishing aside, this is the bond package on the ballot today.

After the last election, when the Better Bond crowd promised they weren't anti-bond, but pro-"Better Bond," I kept waiting to hear their plan. Where were the community meetings to build consensus for an alternative? Where was their proposal? I only saw one, released after the board voted on the bond package we have now. These are not the actions of leaders interested in the flourishing of our community. They are the actions of conflict entrepreneurs who peddle in outrage and disruption, feigning innocence while they dismantle the institutions that form some of our foundational social fabric.

In an interview with Russell Moore, writer David Brooks talked about how communities have different problems to tackle. In some places it is housing or employment. In Midland, it's arguably education. The challenges can be daunting, but they are not unsolvable. Brooks defines community as "a group of people with a common story, and it's also a group of people with a common project." To work on the project, we must organize around a "common love." Differences of opinion aside, I still believe Midland has a common love for our children.

Early this school year, as I was driving my girls to school, I sat at a stoplight beside an older apartment complex in central Midland. I watched out my window while a young mother hurried her little one out the door. He looked like a kindergartner, the trademark 'backpack-bigger-than-he-is' giving his age away. She had on the uniform of a local store. He scampered down the walkway while she turned to lock their apartment door. I pictured the day that might be stretching before her... dropping him off at school before heading to her shift as a cashier.

The truth is, I have choices about my kids' educations, but given where she lives and works, I doubt she has many options. I'm supportive of school choice and charters and even private school, but we cannot pretend alternatives can accommodate all Midland students. Sitting at that stoplight, I felt a deep sense of responsibility to her.

She needs a healthy Midland public school. Her son needs a healthy public school. Our community needs a healthy public school. We need this bond.