

Austin Independent School District (TX)

GPA: **2.57**

Rank: **2nd place out of 50**

Documents Examined: Board policies
(Collective bargaining is illegal in Texas)*

HIGHLY FLEXIBLE
FLEXIBLE
SOMEWHAT FLEXIBLE
SOMEWHAT RESTRICTIVE
RESTRICTIVE
HIGHLY RESTRICTIVE

Introduction

This study of the nation's fifty largest school districts starts from a simple premise: district labor agreements should not make it difficult for schools to be nimble, smart, flexible, high-performing organizations.

In particular, the study focuses on provisions that may limit school leaders' ability to attract and retain excellent teachers, to identify and remove ineffective instructors, to use professional development as a tool of organizational improvement, and to manage school operations in a professional manner—i.e., to run the most effective school possible in terms of core instructional and educational activities, crucial areas where school leaders need enough authority to match their mounting accountability obligations and executive responsibilities in a results-based era.

The Grades

The scale on which districts were graded reflects the approach outlined above. Grades of A or B generally indicate provisions that confer on school leaders the latitude to man-

age their schools in a professional manner. A grade of C generally means the agreement (or, as in this case, district policy) is silent regarding the provision in question—i.e., it neither affirms nor denies a school leader's right to take a specific course of action. Grades of D and F generally indicate provisions that impede or explicitly bar school leaders from exercising discretion in a given area.

Austin's overall grade, therefore, reflects the degree to which district policies constrain school leaders' ability to make decisions on important management issues. It is in no way a holistic assessment of local education policy or school leadership, much less of school effectiveness.

Overall GPA: 2.57 (2nd place out of 50)

Austin's GPA is the average of its scores in three areas: Compensation, Personnel Policies, and Work Rules.

Austin lands a Flexible rating, the second-highest possible, for its 2.57 GPA, ranking second among the fifty districts studied—and first among the six Texas districts examined here. The district earned the top score in Personnel Policies and the second-highest in Work Rules. Its disappointing D+ in the Compensation category, however, substantially lowers its overall score.

Compensation: D+ (33rd percentile)

The Compensation grade combines four components: Credit for Previous Experience, Performance Pay, Hardship Pay for High-Needs Schools, and Extra Pay for Shortage Subjects.

Austin board policy is silent on whether schools may raise starting teacher salaries based on previous experience teaching in a private school or college or working in a subject-related profession. The district reported to NCTQ, however, that this is permissible for teachers who worked in a private school or college, giving Austin a B+ for that component. Board policy also allows schools to reward teachers of shortage subjects, though because it only identifies opportunities for extra pay in two of the four subjects examined (math and special edu-

Compensation	D +
1. Credit for Previous Experience	B +
2. Performance Pay	F
3. Hardship Pay for High-Needs Schools	F
4. Extra Pay for Shortage Subjects	B
Personnel Policies	B +
5. Tenure	N/A
6. Evaluation.	A
7. Layoffs	A
8. Transfers	C
Work Rules	B-
9. Professional Development	C
10. Subcontracting Operations†	C
11. Faculty Meetings	B
12. Teacher Leave	A

cation, but not science or English as a second language), it earns a B for that component. Austin receives two Fs in this category, barring schools from rewarding teachers on the basis of performance or for teaching in high-needs schools.

Personnel Policies: B+ (tied with Chicago for first place)

The Personnel Policies grade combines four components: Tenure, Evaluation, Layoffs, and Transfers.

Austin ties with Chicago for top honors in this category. Its evaluation policies are stellar; schools are permitted to factor student performance, including test scores, into teacher evaluations. In addition, Austin is one of only two districts in this study to grant school leaders the right to retain an outstanding young teacher over one with greater seniority during layoffs. (The other is Chicago.) On the issue of transfers, Austin's record is mixed. Board policy gives school leaders the flexibility to consider new hires on an equal footing with internal applicants for vacant positions, but it also requires that school leaders choose the most junior teacher in a certification area when transfers are necessary. Board policy is silent on whether a transferring teacher can "bump" a less senior teacher from his or her job. All in all, the district gets a C for the Transfers component. Tenure rules in Austin, as in most places, are set by state law, not local decision; therefore, the district did not receive a grade for that component.

Work Rules: B- (94th percentile)

The Work Rules grade combines four components: Professional Development, Subcontracting Operations, Faculty Meetings, and Teacher Leave.

Austin board policy is silent on whether teachers must be given salary credit and/or stipends for professional development activities outside the scheduled workday and on whether school leaders may subcontract school operations to nonunion workers. Board policy is also silent with regard to faculty meetings, but the district receives a B because it reported to NCTQ that the length of faculty meetings is not capped. The district earns an A for giving principals the flexibility to craft their own policies with respect to teacher leave.

Conclusion

Austin is the second most principal-friendly environment in this study, a district where school leaders have substantial ability to assemble and lead strong teams. On the other hand, the fact that Austin ranks so highly among all districts in this study while bringing home a report card that features five component grades of C or lower shows just how unimpressive even "flexible" districts really are when it comes to empowering school leaders in key domains. To better equip its school leaders with the flexibility they need to manage their schools effectively, the Austin Board of Trustees should consider explicitly conferring on school leaders the right to:

1. raise the starting salaries of teachers with all forms of relevant prior experience. (Board policy is silent on this issue.)
2. reward teachers on the basis of performance and for teaching in high-needs schools. (Board policy bars these practices.)
3. base decisions regarding teacher transfers on individual merit and performance rather than seniority. (Of the three indicators directly addressing teacher transfers, board policy requires school leaders to consider seniority on one, grants them flexibility on one, and is silent on one.)
4. subcontract (i.e., outsource) certain school operations. (Board policy is silent on this issue.)

* The data examined in this report come from the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) database, "Teacher Roles, Rules and Rights." All data were culled from the NCTQ database in November 2007. In states that permit collective bargaining, NCTQ examined collective bargaining agreements, with the exception of Jordan School District in Utah, which does not have a bargaining agreement. In states where collective bargaining is either illegal or otherwise not practiced, as in Texas, NCTQ examined school board policies. Where a provision in state law precludes the possibility of a collective bargaining agreement or school board policy addressing a certain component in our study, we excluded it from our analysis, marking the component "N/A." Find a more detailed explanation of this report's methodology starting on page 14.

† This indicator refers to the right of school leaders to outsource school operations to nonunion workers. NCTQ uses the term "subcontracting" in its database, which we retain here in the interest of consistency.