

Northeast Austin School Initiative Overview and Summary

A synopsis of community dialog and expert insight regarding the needs and opportunities for a new public school in northeast Austin, captured through meetings and surveys initiated by Catellus Development Corporation

July 2014

ABOUT THE INITIATIVE

Catellus and the Mueller Team have been working for several years with community members, Austin ISD and its schools on envisioning Northeast Austin's education future. From its inception, the Mueller municipal airport redevelopment master plan, developed with input from Austin ISD, has included a designated 10-acre site for a public school to serve Northeast Austin.

With 13,000 residents, including many families with children, projected to call Mueller home upon completion, the need for additional educational capacity in the area is clear and becoming ever more imminent. Catellus has, throughout Mueller's history, maintained an ongoing dialogue with Austin ISD on how to best address this need. However, this need has had to be balanced among the many demands faced by Austin ISD as it serves the families of our rapidly growing city and region.

Austin ISD facilities bond programs in 2004 and 2008 proved to not be sufficient to include funding for an investment in a new Northeast Austin school, and the district's 2013 bond proposition for new school construction unfortunately did not pass. In light of this, Catellus and its consulting partners have undertaken an initiative to bring together expert insights and broad community input to help chart a path forward for educational solutions that meet the growth and needs of Northeast Austin.

During the spring of 2014, key milestones in this initiative included:

1. A **Northeast Austin School Public Workshop**, held February 25, that invited residents and stakeholders from Mueller and the 16 surrounding neighborhoods to capture and synthesize the area's values and visions regarding the next Northeast Austin school;
2. A **community survey**, fielded both in person (at the public workshop) and online (via invitation to Mueller and surrounding neighborhoods), to provide additional data and insight about opinions and perceptions regarding future educational options in Northeast Austin; and
3. A **Day of Big Ideas: Urban Education Meets Innovation**, an all-day summit held March 20 that brought local and national educational leaders together with key civic leaders and educators to take stock of the Northeast Austin educational landscape and prepare the way for future decisions.

This document provides an overview and summary of each of these three initial endeavors to help guide consideration of next steps.

1. Northeast Austin School Public Workshop

More than 70 residents and stakeholders from Northeast Austin gathered in February to provide input and engage in a dialogue on issues related to the next school to be built in the area.

Feedback was collected through facilitated conversations in four topic areas:

- Attendance and Enrollment
- Governance Models and Structures
- Curriculum and Design
- Innovative Partnerships.

Attendance and Enrollment

Attendance/enrollment zones are geographical or zip code boundaries that determine what school a child will attend based on his or her address of residence. These boundaries typically apply to public schools and not to private schools unless that is specified in the school's charter documents.

Discussion included concern over school enrollment capacity in Northeast Austin prompted by the Mueller redevelopment as well as demographic change as new young families move into nearby neighborhoods. This concern has generally focused on the elementary grades and the two AISD schools serving Mueller, Maplewood (in Cherrywood) and Blanton (in Windsor Park). Parents at both schools noted that they are full, with Maplewood at or on the verge of overcrowding.

Other AISD elementary schools in Northeast Austin (such as Harris) are likewise at or over capacity, while schools to the south of Mueller (such as Blackshear) are generally under-enrolled. Redrawing attendance zones to match students to seats would be required with or without a new Northeast elementary school given the anticipated student population generated by Mueller. It was noted this process may be contentious and if area stakeholders could develop their own consensus around an attendance map, that proposal could be brought to the district with less controversy.

Generally, participants attached importance to the concept of “neighborhood schools,” defined by both physical proximity (walkability, including safe routes to school) and social representation, although some noted that purely geographic attendance zones would risk diminishing socio-cultural diversity. Some participants saw the current liberal AISD transfer policy — which accounts for a significant portion of Maplewood’s enrollment — as being inconsistent with a neighborhood-school vision.

Participants discussed many variations on the standard school model that could address the core challenge of capacity while reflecting the desired character of Northeast Austin and vision for Mueller, including:

- In-district or independent charters with open enrollment zones that were limited by ZIP code to students in the Northeast area
- Flexible facilities that could change grade levels to match student needs
- Co-location with other facilities and services (existing or planned) to serve broader community needs.

Governance Models and Structures

Governance models and structures, in this case, refers to entities such as traditional public school districts, in-district charter schools, independent charter schools, and private schools. These entities may be managed by a school board (in the case of public schools) or by a board composed of parents and other stakeholders (in the case of a private school).

Discussion included diverging views of which model would be best for a Northeast school on the site at Mueller. Some participants felt a need to move forward with a non-AISD option, while others questioned the compatibility of a private or charter solution with the Mueller vision. Several participants indicated a significant philosophical objection to charter schools in general, and many felt that, all other things being equal, a traditional public school for the site at Mueller would be the best option for the area neighborhoods if it were feasible. (The attendees themselves included parents of pre-K, elementary, and middle school students currently attending AISD traditional and magnet schools, independent charters and private schools.)

Participants indicated a general desire to see a well-funded school with the ability to offer innovative programming that serves both Mueller and surrounding neighborhoods, is compatible with the goals and planning principles of Mueller, includes options for shared and joint uses, and meets the broader education needs of Northeast Austin. Concerns were expressed that neither a private school nor an independent charter would be able to meet the latter objective, although many participants were interested in the possibilities for an in-district charter, particularly one that allowed for extensive and meaningful parental involvement.

Curriculum and Design

“Curriculum” refers to the academic plan that guides instruction within a school or program. A curriculum defines the content and scope and sequence of the academic material. “Design,” in this instance, refers to the design of the school, e.g. whether it focuses on a specific population or specific curriculum focus, or uses a specific educational approach, such as a Montessori school. It may also refer to the grade spans included, such as K-5 or K-8.

Both dual-language and Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) curricula, at pre-K and elementary grades, were cited by participants (some of whose children currently attend such programs) as programs that offered special value in Northeast Austin. The discussion also addressed curricula such as Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Math (STEAM), healthcare, and Career and Technical Education (CTE), as well as educational models focused on *how* students learn (e.g., project-based learning, character education, and life-skills training). A commitment to diversity and inclusion was also viewed by many as essential.

Participants saw the greatest need being for a pre-K-5 school, with a potential extension to 8th grade, or possibly just on the upper grades in that span (e.g., 4-8).

Innovative Partnerships

Innovative partnerships refers to non-typical relationships and/or contractual agreements between a school and other community-based entities for the purpose of sharing resources, filling gaps in services or addressing a specific need within a community. For example, a school might partner with a local urban farm to create gardens on the school site, or the facilities could be built to be used in conjunction with another entity, which could expand resources and enable cost sharing.

Discussions focused both on potential partnerships with existing entities that have established a presence at and around Mueller and on new joint- or shared-use models that could be of value to Northeast Austin families. Examples of the former would include:

- The Thinkery, which has existing outreach partnerships with low-income schools
- H-E-B, farmers' market, Sustainable Food Center
- Austin Children's Shelter
- Austin Film Society, AISD Performing Arts Center and City of Austin's Art in Public Places programs (allowing for extension of a "STEM" model to a "STEAM" model)
- Wildflower Terrace and other potential collaborations for multi-generational learning
- Pecan Street, Inc.

Examples of possible new joint- or shared-use models were generated from a number of perceived needs in the area. Themes expressed included:

- Focus on physical activity, open space and recreation by providing access to school facilities, forging relationships between the school and local park facilities, or developing jointly financed facilities (such as the new North Central YMCA on Rundberg Lane)
- Workforce development and life-skills training for all ages, along with a revival of the "community school" model — including evening and weekend courses for adults alongside traditional K-12 programming — formerly offered by AISD at campuses including Maplewood.
- Multi-cultural programming and facilities that would serve both students and adults
- Facilities to accommodate delivery of health and human services and support a variety of nonprofit initiatives

Discussion also brought forward the suggestion of a comprehensive needs assessment to identify service and facility gaps in Northeast Austin that a school could help fill.

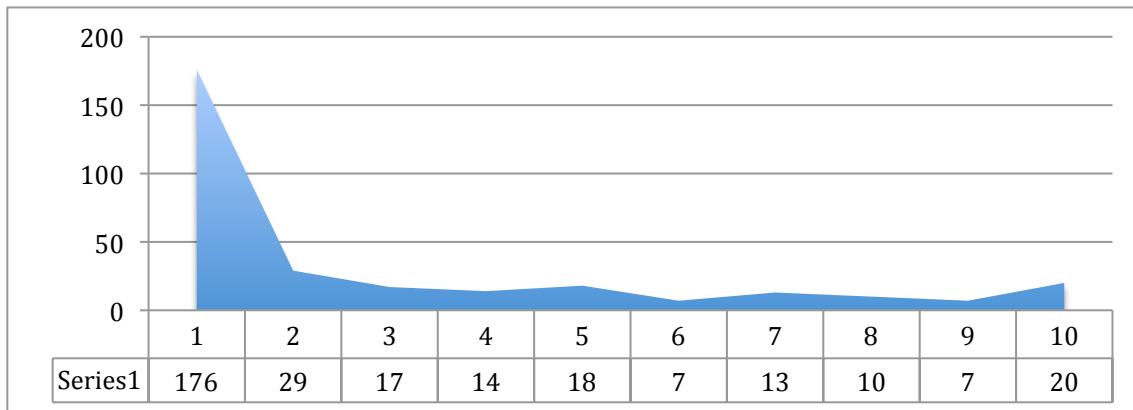
2. Northeast Austin School Community Survey

ABOUT THE RESPONDENTS:

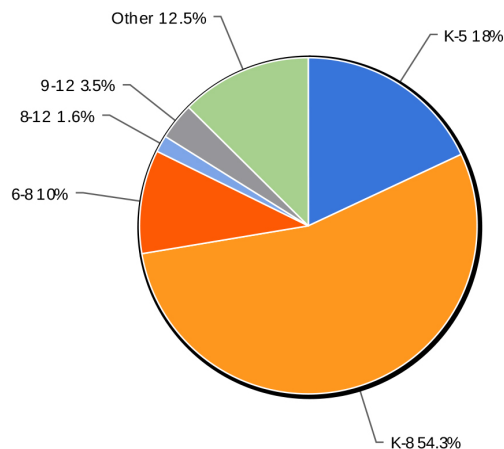
- **317** total responses, almost all from the 78723 ZIP code, which primarily includes the Mueller and Windsor Park neighborhoods
- **68.1%** reported having children under 18 living at home
- Many of these children are pre-school age, currently being served by a variety of local early childhood programs.

Tradeoffs: Boundary Changes vs. New School Construction

Question text: Austin ISD anticipates that enrollment will remain at current levels in upcoming years, but that student-age populations in areas such as Northeast Austin may increase. This may require the district to build new schools to address overcrowding and/or adjust school attendance boundaries. On the scale below, a "1" would mean you very strongly prefer a new public school, whereas a "10" would mean you very strongly prefer redrawing attendance zones. Please indicate your preference of how the district should proceed.



Preferred Grade Levels



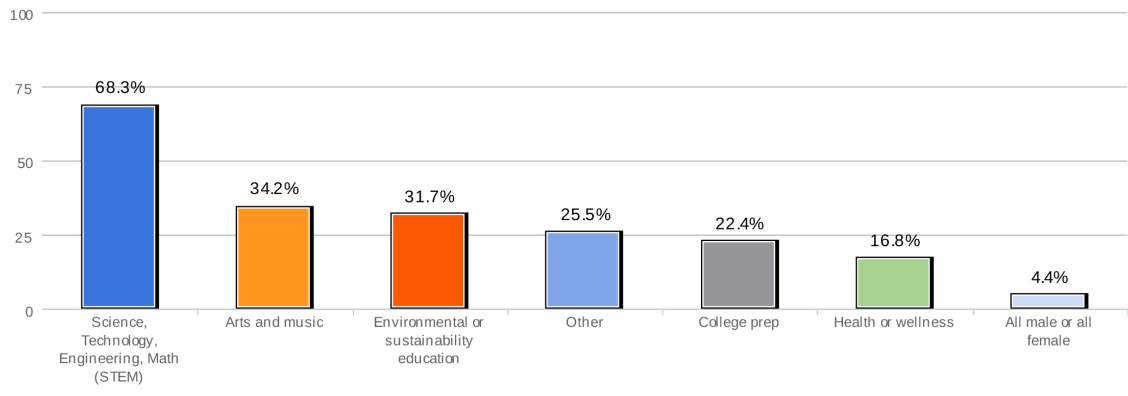
Value	Percent
K-5	18.0%
K-8	54.3%
6-8	10.0%
8-12	1.6%
9-12	3.5%
Other	12.5%

Preferred Curriculum Focus

Question text: A new public school could have a particular focus, such as a curriculum program or a mission to serve a particular population. Do you think the next public school in Northeast Austin should have such a focus?

YES: 49.5% **NO: 50.5%**

Among those who answered yes, the following preferences were expressed:



For "other," the bulk of responses addressed language and dual-language programs.

Perceptions of Educational Options for Northeast Austin

(A) I am quite familiar with this type of school.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Traditional AISD public school	2.3%	2.6%	9.8%	29.7%	55.6%
Independent public charter school	7.3%	12.3%	21.0%	32.3%	27.0%
AISD in-district charter school	10.1%	16.6%	23.3%	31.4%	18.6%
AISD Magnet School	6.8%	9.8%	18.9%	30.4%	34.1%
Private school	4.7%	7.0%	12.4%	37.9%	37.9%
(B) I have a positive impression of this kind of school					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Traditional AISD public school	3.3%	17.0%	27.0%	34.7%	18.0%
Independent public charter school	11.3%	18.2%	36.6%	22.9%	11.0%
AISD in-district charter school	7.6%	13.8%	47.8%	25.3%	5.5%
AISD Magnet School	3.8%	6.3%	28.8%	34.0%	27.1%
Private school	11.9%	17.7%	29.9%	27.2%	13.3%
(C) I would support this type of school at Mueller					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Traditional AISD public school	3.0%	5.6%	13.0%	32.9%	45.5%
Independent public charter school	17.7%	22.9%	22.9%	19.8%	16.7%
AISD in-district charter school	11.4%	16.3%	34.3%	23.9%	14.2%
AISD Magnet School	9.0%	10.7%	25.5%	29.7%	25.2%
Private school	36.1%	27.9%	16.7%	12.2%	7.1%

3. A Day of Big Ideas: Urban Education Meets Innovation

SETTING THE STAGE

SEDL's **Wes Hoover** and Catellus' **Greg Weaver** welcomed approximately 75 attendees, who represented educators, AISD officials, neighbors and other community leaders. Weaver providing a context for the day's discussions. In the wake of the defeat of the Austin ISD's May 2013 bond proposition, which would have provided funding for new schools, Catellus — which continues to prefer that Mueller and surrounding neighborhoods be served by both existing and new AISD public schools — has committed to work with community stakeholders at Mueller, in Northeast Austin and throughout the city and region to address the current and future need for education solutions in the area. A Day of Big Ideas: Urban Education Meets Innovation was designed to open the door for new ways of thinking regarding a public school for northeast Austin.

The need and opportunity at Mueller and in Northeast Austin were further detailed by Catellus' **Deanne Desjardin** and consultant **Doyle Valdez**, a former president of the Austin ISD Board of Trustees. Their presentation outlined for attendees how the influx of new residents into new homes at the Mueller redevelopment (and in other parts of the area) represented one of several major changes impacting AISD, Northeast Austin and education in the broader community. Data available at the time showed the seven public elementary schools closest to Mueller (including the two that serve current Mueller students) have only 40 available seats to meet increased demand from Northeast Austin; Mueller alone is expected to be home to 1,400 school-age children by 2018.

Mueller's designated 10-acre school site, the focus of more than a decade of planning for a future elementary including dialog with AISD, is an asset and resource that can be used to help solve Northeast Austin's education capacity challenge. Community outreach has made clear the local preference for a district public school that delivers educational excellence for students and families from throughout the diverse Northeast neighborhoods. In the absence of bond funding, opportunities for creative partnerships, unique design and curriculum, and innovative finance and governance models can help achieve this core community vision. Mueller's 10 years of forward-looking collaborative planning and implementation provide a supportive context for this ongoing conversation.

THE EXPERT PERSPECTIVES:

Will Lee-Ashley, Chief of Staff Denver Public Schools

Denver's Stapleton redevelopment, though significantly larger than Mueller, provides a model — and cautionary tale — for Austin as it proceeds, and Lee-Ashley detailed how Denver Public Schools (DPS) was challenged to rework its planning and forecasting processes to account for Stapleton-spurred urban infill and neighborhood transition.

In its original vision, the schools at Stapleton were planned to serve both the new development and the (traditionally diverse and lower-income) neighborhoods surrounding the former airport on Denver's east side.

However, faster-than-anticipated growth in family households at Stapleton led to an emergency shortfall in seats for up to 100 children entering kindergarten in 2009, requiring the district to accelerate expansion plans and organize funding to provide schools for twice as many students as anticipated.

This outcome made it difficult to attain the original goals for diversity and school choice, with DPS having to prioritize the immediate need of capacity for Stapleton residents. “We’ve learned a lot of very painful lessons, and I can’t say we’ve solved the problem,” Lee-Ashley noted. “With this much growth and dynamism, it’s a messy ongoing conversation.”

The substantial growth at Stapleton (and other areas in DPS) was accompanied by drops in student populations elsewhere, leading to some of the same mismatch of seats to students seen in Austin ISD. In Denver, the district’s approaches have included co-location with charter schools, joint-use facilities and other ways to maximize facility use, as well as “changing the model of one-school, one-zone” by creating area zones (including Stapleton) with multiple traditional and charter schools with open attendance. In Colorado, all charter schools are authorized by local districts — “We open them, we close them when they’re poor performing, we see them as our schools,” Lee-Ashley said.

**Dr. Pansy Houghton, Director of Student Planning and Placement
Hillsborough County Public Schools, Tampa, Florida**

Dr. Houghton has worked with HCPS — the nation’s eighth-largest school district — as it has migrated through a long timeline of incremental expansions of alternative school models. Today, HCPS is a completely open-choice district, with approximately 50,000 students (25% of the total) attending schools other than their neighborhood/attendance-area campus, and with more than 80 magnet, charter and alternative schools.

This breadth of models provides Houghton and HCPS with a knowledge base for evaluating which models and themes work better than others, and for what purposes. In Tampa, the focus areas for magnets and charters are almost always parent-driven, with great support for arts programs and the high-performing International Baccalaureate curriculum.

Houghton noted those two models “are maintaining diversity, but the other [magnets] are having trouble competing with suburban schools,” as newer schools on the urban fringe draw higher-socioeconomic-status families away from the urban and inner-ring neighborhoods where magnets are located. She added that in general, magnets — serving a higher-performing student population — have been more successful than “attractors” with a particular theme but not unique performance standards.

Houghton stressed these outcomes are as much a product of community engagement as of district-level policymaking. “A school in the community is only as good as those who are willing to help it,” she said, adding that much of her work involves “trying to meet people and build partnerships to support the schools and the districts. It’s not just parents; it’s the whole village.”

**Dr. Caprice Young, President, Education Growth Group
Former President, Los Angeles Unified School District Board of Trustees**

Dr. Young framed her remarks by cautioning against thinking of “the” school of the future — “There are many schools of the future. Schools are becoming more and more niche, rather than more and more comprehensive, because kids have more diverse needs and interests.” This has been the experience of LAUSD, the nation’s second-largest school system, which in 10 years saw a 23% decline in enrollment, with both parents and teachers decamping to charter schools. Today, LAUSD has about 763 traditional district campuses, more than 260 charter schools, and 150 campuses with other models of innovative governance.

Within an overarching goal of accelerating learning (primarily at secondary levels), Dr. Young identified three objectives of *learning to learn*, *loving learning* and *leading learning* on a pathway to student achievement. To accomplish those objectives, the variety of different roles and relationships for students, parents, teachers, community partners and school administrators is almost limitless, Young noted, particularly if one lets go of the traditional assumptions — the “cages” — of school design.

Those cages, Dr. Young continued, could include optimal class size, the primary role of teachers, traditional grade levels and grade-level groupings, the length of the school day or year, and school boundaries and attendance zones. Like Denver, Los Angeles created multi-school attendance zones with both traditional and innovative campus models to serve students — which provided a motivation for the existing elementary schools to innovate and increase their performance levels.

Dr. Young noted that, when parents have information, “they tend to balance choosing schools that have both higher academic achievement AND that provide the best fit for their kids.” She pointed to her work with GreatSchools.org, which provides parents with information to guide this decision-making, and to her own experience in placing her children in what, on test scores alone, was only a moderately successful school — but which provided the best mix of programs and supporting services for their interests and needs.

**C. Peter Svahn, Principal
CP Svahn Educational Services, Inc. Plymouth, MA**

Svahn’s specialty is not education but public finance, which he has applied to creating innovative financing models for both public and charter school districts and nonprofit private schools in several states. His presentation primarily provided an overview of different tools and strategies for financing new schools, particularly charters that are challenged to find construction funding without access to district or municipal bond funding or a sufficient track record on their own to be credit-worthy to traditional lenders.

Absent those funding sources, Svahn said, schools could look to real estate investment interests (either private developers or independent education-oriented REITS), the issuance of revenue bonds secured by school revenues, various forms of tax increment financing, philanthropic investment, and/or nonprofit lending, by community development financial institutions and through many types of innovative grant opportunities.

He cited two case studies (both in Delaware) that involved combinations of these strategies, including a pooled revolving fund of foundation funding and a joint-use facility with shared construction and maintenance financing.

When considering new opportunities, Svahn said we should think in terms of asking, “whose buildings are they?” Rather than think of the buildings as belonging to a school district or a charter school, etc. they should be considered as community property and should be used and managed as efficiently and effectively as possible, perhaps by an independent school facilities authority that can lease out buildings to an operator (district, private or charter) and can best fulfill the area’s needs. He said, over time, organizations often become bureaucratic and do things the way they always have. In his opinion, let the school focus on the needs of kids, and not be responsible for buildings as well.

Moderated Discussion:

The group discussion with the expert panel included deeper exploration of some of the topics cited in the presentations, as well as frankly expressed concerns about the challenges at Mueller and in Northeast Austin. Some important themes of the discussion include:

- **Charter schools:** In Texas, school districts have more freedom to innovate within state law than in other states; “in-district charters,” which are fairly rare in Texas (AISD only has three), are by far the most common in Colorado, while in Florida local school districts have the sole authority to grant and revoke charters, whether operated by those districts or others. Austin ISD leaders in the room noted that the district is open to different ideas and wants to study its options.
- **Flexible facilities:** Both attendees and panelists noted that buildings would ideally be flexible as to grade-level or program to accommodate the right number and mix of students as they rise through the system, though this is difficult to anticipate unless capacity is in place well before the students arrive.
- **Money:** Stapleton has tax increment financing devoted to schools, which Mueller does not. However, Svahn noted that student funding that follows enrollment is “as credit-worthy as the local or state funding source is, and while it’s not guaranteed, it is predictable, just as revenue from a water or sewer district would be.” Svahn also noted that “from a financing perspective, the strongest schools I’ve seen are the ones that are open and transparent and have ongoing conversations about these issues.”
- **Boundaries:** The experts generally endorsed the concept of a larger Northeast Austin attendance zone, or overlapping zones, to foster the diversity and choice desired by both Mueller and surrounding neighborhoods, and potentially addressing the concerns surrounding the communities’ existing schools, both those that are succeeding (like Maplewood) and those that are more challenged. “It is sometimes the case that solving a challenge in one part of town means you have to solve a challenge 10 miles away at the same time, and you have to do it within kid time,” Dr. Young said. “You go through a generation of kids every three years, and adults can spend 30 years getting their act together.”

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Curriculum

Key themes in this facilitated discussion included:

- Grade flexibility and ensuring smooth transitions for students, particularly between elementary and middle-school grades (including 4-8 and 5-8 models) and between the two different AISD vertical teams currently serving Northeast Austin
- Engagement within the school community, with other school communities in Northeast Austin, and with the larger community, including support for a diverse and balanced mix of social, cultural and economic needs and backgrounds
- Project- and service-based learning anchored in community partnerships and mentorships, including opportunities for innovation, entrepreneurship and real-world applications
- Choices of signature programs to meet the individual needs of children, including possibilities for magnets and attractors such as dual-language, arts, sports, public service, healthcare

Governance

Key themes in this facilitated discussion included:

- Consideration of school boundaries, full utilization of existing facilities, and mapping educational assets and capacity in the larger Northeast Austin area
- Honest dialogue, trust-building, education and engagement around Northeast Austin needs and how to meet them with both existing and new models, including addressing persistent divisions within East Austin by creating new alliances and stakeholder groups
- As part of education and engagement, addressing perception issues relating to charter schools as well as the traditional schools in AISD, and also the perceptions of Mueller and the surrounding neighborhoods; this ongoing dialogue and mutual familiarization could help stakeholders understand each others' perspectives and the assets they can bring to solving problems of common concern
- Defining with more specificity any community goals or concerns that a charter model (either in-district or independent) would be better equipped to address than an Austin ISD public school

Funding

Key themes in this facilitated discussion included:

- Philanthropic funding opportunities for raising seed funds
- Community partnerships, including joint-use opportunities that could both produce revenue and reduce costs, as well as investments from the business community
- Locating assets that could be leveraged or converted to financing for a new Northeast Austin school
- Alternative ownership models, such as lease-back provisions to the district
- Working with current schools and boundaries to create a unique opportunity, value proposition and plan for a new school that would be appealing to investors of all types

Partnerships

Key themes in this facilitated discussion included:

- Casting a wide net for partnerships — that while a school may be serving Northeast Austin, the partnerships that support and sustain it need not only be within that geographic area
- Targeting both the educational needs of students and parents and the service needs of the area more broadly (e.g., to inform joint-use facility development)
- Identifying and leveraging assets Mueller can offer beyond the school site
- Exploring the wide range of potential partners, such as:
 - Recreation centers
 - Health and human service providers
 - Higher education institutions
 - Businesses and business groups
 - Other governmental entities

Next Steps

All four discussions identified common themes for next steps, including:

- Further education and dialogue at the grassroots level to change perceptions and build awareness of the variety of educational options available to Northeast Austin.
- Careful identification of the trends and needs of Northeast Austin (both education-specific and for broader community services) and the assets that can be brought together to meet them
- Creating potential models to bring to stakeholders for their input and feedback