Department of Research and Evaluation
Austin Independent School District

AISD Net-Talk, 2011-12
Student Results

INTRODUCTION

Between March 1st and 3rd, 2012, a representative sample of AISD middle and high school students participated in an online discussion with the Superintendent. The Net-Talk is an online forum where students are encouraged to discuss topics of interest to AISD stakeholders as well as to submit and comment on questions or ideas[1] of interest to them. This forum allows students to voice their opinions in different ways: 1) by submitting an idea, 2) by voting "up" if they support the idea or "down" if they don't, or 3) by adding comments. In December 2011, AISD Superintendent Meria Carstarphen met with the District's Student Advisory Committee to identify key topics that would help start the conversation. This year's Net-Talk discussion focused on 1) Bullying, 2) Resource Allocation, 3) Academics, 4) Internet Access, and 5) GPA calculations. Various discussion questions/ideas were formulated by AISD staff based on the results of the Superintendent's meeting with the Student Advisory Committee (see Appendix A for details), and other ideas were proposed and formulated by students. The content of all ideas was reviewed, and results for the most popular ones (i.e., ideas that received most votes and comments) were analyzed. The following report provides a summary of students' comments regarding the most popular topics and ideas. Results are presented in order of popularity, from most popular to least popular.

Table 1. Number of votes and comments received within each topic

	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Bullying	407	341	66	160
Resource Allocation	363	313	50	179
Academics	68	53	15	48
Internet Access	34	15	19	20
GPA Calculations	15	7	8	5

BULLYING

Various ideas for a Bullying Prevention Month were proposed by the Student Advisory Committee. Table 2 illustrates results of the most popular discussion questions proposed by the Student Advisory Committee and by other students participating in the Net-Talk.

Table 2. Number of votes and comments for the most popular bullying ideas discussed

Bullying Ideas	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Proposed by the Student Advisory Committee				
Contest for anti-bullying campaign	34	33	1	10
Festivals or Carnivals to raise awareness	33	33	0	13
Bands, T-shirts and water bottles with messages	28	27	1	13
Social events –maybe during advisory or after school	26	25	1	12
Guest Speakers at schools during No Place for Hate Week	26	23	3	12
Pledge T-shirt and/or T-shirt design contest	25	24	1	9
Other ideas discussed				
Anti-bullying lanyards	13	9	4	9
Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble	5	3	2	0

[*]The words "idea" and "question" are used interchangeably in this report.

Bullying ideas proposed by the Student Advisory Committee

Contest for anti-bullying campaign

> "This really gets people driven to work towards improving the social atmosphere of the school."

This idea received the most votes (33 votes "up" and 1 "down"). Students expressed a growing concern over bullying at their schools, and most students agreed that an anti-bullying contest would help create awareness and motivate students to fight bullying. Several students suggested the prize to be something that they could add to their resume or something that would help them apply for scholarships.

Festivals or Carnivals to raise awareness

This idea received unanimous support (33 votes "up" and 0 votes "down"). All students' comments expressed their excitement over the possibility of having a carnival. Some students suggested expanding the invitation to elementary school students to start creating bullying awareness at a younger age, and to include other topics such as drugs and under-aged drinking. Other students noted that one of the benefits of holding a carnival would be to involve families since, as a student stated, "*some problems start at home.*"

Bands, T-shirts and water bottle with messages

> "I think wrist bands would be a very, very good idea. I got this wristband from my church, and all the time, people look at it when I'm wearing it."

Students were very supportive of this idea and expressed their interest in wearing a T-shirt as long as it looked "*nice enough.*" Some students pointed out that middle and high school students are generally into fashion fads, therefore the anti-bullying message or slogan should be "*catchy.*" A group of students expressed interest in wearing wrist bands since the messages tend to get a lot of exposure.

Social events –maybe during advisory or after school

Most students agreed with this idea. Some students mentioned that advisory would be a good time to promote social events since it would allow students to get to know each other better. Other students indicated that many students are bullied during advisory, making it a relevant period to discuss bullying.

Guest Speakers at schools during *No Place for Hate* Week

> "Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble is a collaboration between Theater Action Project and Safe Place that is comprised of teen volunteers who present plays at local schools in Austin. Their plays focus on bullying, stereotyping and healthy teen relationships. They do this for free, and I think that it would be a great thing for them to be invited to present at schools that are struggling with these issues."

Students were excited about the possibility of having a guest speaker at their schools. Some students commented that being accredited as a *No Place for Hate* campus was not enough and that events, such as inviting guest speakers, would help remind students what it means to be a *No Place for Hate* campus. Several students suggested inviting someone who had been a victim of bullying and could share their experiences with the audience.

One student proposed bringing the Changing Lives Youth Theater Ensemble as a guest speaker.

Pledge T-shirt and/or T-shirt design

Students felt that pledge T-shirts or a T-shirt design contest would be very popular at their schools and it would also give *"creative folks the opportunity to have their design on a shirt!"*

Other Bullying ideas discussed during the Net-Talk

Anti-bullying lanyards

This was the most popular idea proposed by students. Even though most students showed excitement toward wearing a lanyard with an anti-bullying message others were concerned this would incite bullying since lanyards are not too popular.

The Austin/Travis County Hate Crimes Task Force added some questions under this same topic (see Appendix B) and students were invited to share their thoughts and feelings. When asked if they would like to be involved in preventing bullying and bias at their campus, students unanimously responded yes. They reported that students who are bullied the most are generally those who "stand out from the crowd for whatever reason." Some students mentioned that overweight and economically disadvantaged students are bullied the most.

RESOURCE ALLOCATION

The Superintendent and the Student Advisory Committee were interested in knowing how last year's budget cuts impacted education at the campus level. Most students' comments focused on the effects large class sizes have had on learning. Table 3 illustrates the questions that were asked and their level of popularity.

Table 3. Number of votes and comments Resource Allocation ideas received

Resource Allocation Ideas	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Discussion questions formulated by AISD staff				
Have the sizes of your classes increased?	16	15	1	22
Have you noticed a difference in the quality of teaching and learning as a result of larger classes?	20	18	2	12
Have these budget cuts affected your education?	15	12	3	7
Given that resources are limited, how would you suggest that the district allocate funding for technology?	6	5	1	1
Other ideas discussed				
Better Lunches	29	28	1	17
Students with special needs and regular students should be in the same elective classes	21	21	0	15

Resource Allocation questions formulated by AISD staff

Have the sizes of your classes increased? / Have you noticed a difference in the quality of teaching and learning as a result of larger classes?

Students were very participative when asked about the effects of larger class sizes on their education. All students who posted comments mentioned that large class sizes have negatively impacted their learning experience.

"With class sizes increasing, it is harder to relate and [get] to know my teachers. It may not sound important, but, the more of a connection that I have with the teacher the easier it is to ask help and volunteer in class."

Some reported that larger class sizes have inhibited students from participating in class, other students felt that teachers with large groups were stressed all the time.

Students also commented that occasionally there is not enough space or desks for students in the classrooms. A student from Murchison middle school pointed out that his school is over-crowded and indicated that several theatre classes have around 50 students.

> "We have about 32 students in my English class and my teachers don't always have control of the things that are going on."

Other Resource Allocation ideas discussed during the Net-Talk

The most popular ideas suggested by students under the Resource Allocation topic were: 1) school meals and 2) support for special need students.

Better Lunches

This idea received plenty of support. All students who commented on this idea agreed that food at their school did not taste good; however, not all students agreed that food at their campus was unhealthy. A couple of students mentioned that their school is making an effort to improve nutrition by working with a professional chef. Other students requested having more variety and vegetarian lunches.

Students with special needs in elective classes

The student who started this discussion wrote: *"Don't you think children with special needs are just like us but just need a little more help? We are all the same but treated differently. I think that they have the right to be in the same electives as us. We should all learn the same thing but they can learn a little bit slower. I know they wanna be like regular people but they can't. I think that they shouldn't be separated from most people as they are now."*

Students unanimously supported this idea; however, their comments were mixed. On one hand, a group of students reported that separating special need students from elective classes was segregating them, yet another group of students pointed out that including them in regular classrooms would incite bullying.

ACADEMICS

Students were asked about the new state legislature law requiring school districts to replace high school TAKS tests with end of course exams. Few students discussed their understanding of the new requirements, but many students expressed their concern over the new test and not feeling prepared.

Table 4. Number of votes and comments Academics ideas received

Academics Ideas	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Discussion questions formulated by AISD Staff				
Are you concerned about these new tests?	20	17	3	11
Have your teachers prepared you for the new tests?	9	2	7	5
Do you understand the new requirements?	7	6	1	4
Other ideas discussed				
Money	8	6	2	11

Academics questions formulated by AISD staff

Are you concerned about these new tests? If so what are your concerns?

This idea was very popular and students posted many comments under it. Students' main concern was that the STAAR test would be much harder than TAKS and that teachers were not preparing them adequately. Some students also reported that their teachers were stressed out over the new test. Other students expressed their worries over the test being timed.

"I am extremely worried about the new STAAR testing. It bothers me to know that it is going to be ten times harder than the TAKS test. I don't like the idea of being timed because some people might have trouble finishing on time [...] I know that this year the test will not be counted as 15% of our final grade, but I don't think that it should ever be counted toward our final grade. I really don't understand the purpose of the standardized test anyway."

Other Academics ideas discussed during the Net-Talk

Is the money given to schools spent properly

This idea was proposed by a student and received many comments. Most students felt like the money was not being spent wisely. Some students mentioned that their teachers had received iPads® from the district and that their schools got new touch computers, none of which were necessary. Students requested that the money be used to retain teachers and keep small class sizes.

INTERNET ACCESS

This topic received very few comments. Most students who posted a comment agreed that allowing access to social networking sites at schools would be too distracting and would negatively impact learning.

Table 5. Votes and comments Internet Access ideas received

Internet Access Ideas	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Discussion questions formulated by AISD Staff				
What do you think about the district's policy on restricting access?	8	1	7	2
If access to social networking sites were allowed, would this access contribute to or take away from your learning experience?	16	5	11	7
Other ideas discussed				
What do you think about the AISD Cloud and the ability to access your resources from anywhere at any time?	5	4	1	7

Other Internet Access ideas discussed during the Net-Talk

The Cloud

The AISD cloud was proposed as an idea for students to discuss. Students agreed that having a cloud was very useful, but most of them reported experiencing problems logging in.

"Most students at my school don't know about the existence of The Cloud. Most of them don't even know what its useful for. I think the cloud should be more advertised at schools."

GPA CALCULATIONS

GPA calculations was the least popular topic in this year's Net-Talk and did not receive enough comments to be analyzed.

Table 6. Number of votes and comments GPA calculations ideas received

GPA Calculations Ideas	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Discussion questions formulated by AISD Staff				
Should elective courses receive the same weight in a student's GPA as core courses?	8	3	5	3
If elective courses did not receive the weight, would students be less likely to take them?	7	4	3	2

APPENDIX

Appendix A. Initial Net-Talk Discussion Questions/Ideas

Topics	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
Bullying				
Positive behavior support incentives	16	16	0	5
Meet new person each day approach	12	3	9	3
Ice breakers at games	11	9	2	4
Contest for anti-bullying campaign	34	33	1	10
Lock-in to solve problems	9	3	6	1
Assembly for presentation about bullying	14	13	1	3
Saturday School movie about cause and effect	10	1	9	1
Social events –maybe during advisory or after school	26	25	1	12
Festivals or Carnivals to raise awareness	33	33	0	13
Guest Speakers at schools during No Place for Hate Week	26	23	3	12
Small group discussions on campuses	7	4	3	0
Bands, T-shirts and water bottle with messages	28	27	1	13
Pledge T-shirt and/or T-shirt design contest	25	24	1	9
Pledge chain and/or chain link promise for no bullying	10	2	8	0
District Parade to raise awareness.	18	13	5	5
Resource Allocation				
Have the sizes of your classes increased?	16	15	1	22
Have you noticed a difference in the quality of teaching and learning as a result of larger classes?	20	18	2	12
Have these budget cuts affected your education?	15	12	3	7
Given that resources are limited, how would you suggest that the district allocate funding for technology?	6	5	1	1

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Academics				
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Internet Access				
What do you think about the district's policy on restricting access?	8	1	7	2
If access to social networking sites were allowed, would this access contribute to or take away from your learning experience?	16	5	11	7
GPA Calculations				
Should elective courses receive the same weight in a student's GPA as core courses?	8	3	5	3
If elective courses did not receive the weight, would students be less likely to take them?	7	4	3	2

Appendix B. Austin/Travis County Hate Crimes Task Force Questions

	Total Votes	Vote Up	Vote Down	Comments
What might a youth conference on preventing bullying look like, sound like, feel like?	5	4	1	2
What are some of your ideas on how to prevent bullying and bias?	5	5	0	3
Would you like to be involved in preventing bullying and bias?	17	17	0	6
What problems do you see in schools?	12	11	1	14
What do you do when you see bullying or bias?	5	5	0	5
Have you been involved in bullying (target or perpetrator)?	7	4	3	7
What are some words to describe racism?	6	6	0	2
How do you define bullying?	5	5	0	5
How do you define bias?	5	4	1	1