

# South San Antonio ISD moves to close three schools in bid to avert financial crisis

by Isaac Windes

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Angie Olvera shouts at South San Antonio Independent School District trustees about their decision to close three schools as she leaves the board meeting Wednesday. Credit: Brenda Bazán / San Antonio Report

South San Antonio Independent School District trustees, faced with a \$12 million budget deficit following years of declining enrollment, voted 5-2 to close three schools Wednesday during a meeting that was sparsely attended by the public.

The schools that will be closed are Athens and Kindred elementary schools and Kazen Middle School.

Superintendent Henry Yzaguirre initially suggested closing four campuses in January, including West Campus High School. West Campus was removed from the March agenda by Homer Flores, the board president, according to trustee Ernesto Arrellano Jr., who wrote a memo along with two other board members requesting it be discussed.

Flores told the San Antonio Report after the meeting that the process of finalizing agenda items is a collaboration between the board president and the superintendent.

Yzaguirre said a timeline will be shared in the coming days, after teachers and staff are notified.

Arrellano said it was unfair to only consider the three smaller schools, noting the operating cost of the high school, which he said is 12 times more than the other three combined.

Trustees Shirley Ibarra and Abel Martinez Jr. voted no on the closures.

Ibarra said she was disappointed the district didn't find other options to save money.

"I feel that there was a deal made to save one school and close the other three down," she said. "The other three schools down on this side of town."

Ibarra recalled that she was one of the trustees who voted to reopen the campuses after they were closed previously due to low enrollment.

Trustee Manuel Lopez, who voted for the closure, said removing the high school was an inappropriate action by the board president.

"If it's not [on] the agenda, we don't have to vote for it, so we don't look bad for our constituents," he said. "It is that simple. I am very ... disappointed

with the board president and we need to do something about that ... in the near future.”

The quick decision was a contrast to an emotional meeting in January in which the board voted down a similar measure, and a handful of community meetings earlier this month in which the topic was broached again.

A much more subdued crowd on Wednesday night asked the board not to close schools, and an advocacy organization handed out letters calling the process rushed and asking for more time.

“We are appalled that the decision to close schools is being made on such short notice, and during spring break, leaving families with few opportunities to deliberate and discuss the impacts of this decision on their lives,” the letters from COPS/Metro Alliance said.

COPS/Metro Alliance is a coalition of congregations, schools and unions working together on behalf of families.

After the vote, an angry Angie Olvera, who has spoken at every meeting on the topic, shouted at trustees, reminding them that they’d be up for election.

Tom Cummins, president of the San Antonio AFL-CIO, spoke on behalf of South San Antonio American Federation of Teachers before the vote, repeating calls to solve financial problems that led to a \$12 million deficit and declining enrollment in other ways.

“All of these are legitimate concerns that must be addressed,” he said. “However, we encourage you to vote no tonight (and) we don’t say that lightly.”

Cummins said closures could lead to even more students leaving the district than have done so already.

Abe Saavedra, who was appointed by the Texas Education Agency to monitor the district, said members should do the right thing, even if it is hard. Saavedra previously served as superintendent of the district.

“The last time a board voted to close schools it was during my time and several of those board members got voted out the very next election,” he said. “I’m not telling you that that won’t happen. But I am telling you, you need to do what’s right for kids in order for this district to get better.”

Pulling from board meeting agendas and remarks, Saavedra traced the growing deficit from \$2 million in August to \$9.5 million in November.

“The reason I point this out is that there’s been a history of making decisions that quite frankly are not the right decisions for the kids,” he said.

Saavedra said the board’s recent decisions could be part of the reason students and families are leaving the district.

“Many times, I’ve heard the board talk about why the district loses enrollment. All sorts of reasons, frankly,” he said. “But never have we talked about the reason in front of me right now. If decisions made by the board (are) the reason families decided to go elsewhere.”

According to Texas Education Agency data, a growing number of students living in the area served by South San Antonio ISD are transferring to other schools, primarily public charter schools.

The majority, over 1,000 students, are attending IDEA public schools, one of the largest charters in the state.

Others are attending nearby schools, including 22 students who are now enrolled at Edgewood ISD and just over 200 students who are attending San Antonio ISD.

Some of that is offset by 600 students who live in other districts but attend South San Antonio ISD schools. Those students are there from Southwest, San Antonio and Harlandale ISDs.

The district is celebrating its centennial this weekend amid the tense and emotional discussions around how to cut back the budget to resolve a \$12 million deficit because of declines in enrollment that are forecast to continue and inflation.