

# CARES: Implementation, Impact, and Adaptation

2020–2021

## Introduction

The CARES customer service, employee recognition, and support team in Austin Independent School District (AISD) provided invaluable service and support to the AISD community, including campus and department staff, families, and students, during the 2020–2021 school year. Now in its fourth year of implementation, the CARES (which stands for Customer-focused, Action-oriented, Responsive, Empathetic, and Service-driven) team carried forward the district's guiding principles to help nurture a positive and equitable organizational culture. The message and impact of the CARES initiative has continued to spread, as is evidenced by customer service ratings and feedback from families, students and employees. One way the CARES team served the AISD community in the 2020–2021 school year was by responding to nearly 50,000 email, text, and phone call requests for assistance. They also provided emergency support by connecting families with meal services during winter storm Uri in February 2021. This report reviews the implementation and impact of the CARES initiative in five areas: support, communication, employee recognition, professional learning, and progress monitoring, and provides qualitative and quantitative data from various AISD sources.

*People seem to be more customer service driven. I think people realize it's just common courtesy to be helpful and kind.*

## Support

Let's Talk, an online platform used to connect someone with an inquiry or request with a staff member who provides support or information, tracked nearly 50,000 dialogues. After a soft launch in Spring 2019, the Let's Talk platform launched district wide in the 2019–2020 school year. Use of Let's Talk saw a dramatic increase in 2020–2021, due to increased uncertainty and need for support during the COVID-19 pandemic (Figure 1). The average response time was less than a day (0.78), and the weekly average customer service rating was 8.64, remaining consistently high for the last 3 years (Figure 2).

Figure 1.

**CARES's Let's Talk! communication platform use increased dramatically in 2020–2021.**



*Source.* Let's Talk data spring semester 2019, school year 2019–2020, school year 2020–2021

*Note.* School years indicated the range from July 1, 2020, to June 30, 2021.

## Adaptations of Let's Talk

District leaders requested that the CARES team use the Let's Talk! platform to assist families and guardians in enrolling students in the 2021–2022 school year. Consequently, the Let's Talk! platform underwent adaptations in order to play a prominent and crucial role in providing support for district goals and in response to community needs. For example, here are some of the unexpected ways Let's Talk! was utilized:

- provided curbside service to staff members when they were not able to enter the facilities due to the COVID-19 pandemic
- created a new interest area for inquiries related to summer school
- coordinated meal distribution to families during the severe February storm, when many Texans were without power and heat
- coordinated touchless distribution of PRIDE swag to campuses to celebrate Pride week

## Communication

Survey questions were created to help understand the level of adoption of CARES customer experience standards among staff and how they communicated with each other about it. Message dissemination influences adoption, awareness, and capacity to enact an initiative (Rogers et al., 2005). Therefore, program directors and principals can use these data as formative feedback about the degree to which a campus's staff understood and adopted the CARES goals, as well as the effectiveness of their staff's customer service processes. An overview of these responses is provided below.

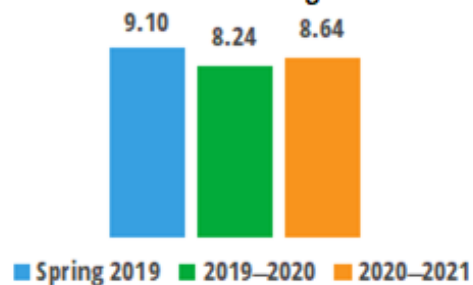
## End of Year Multi-program Survey

The annual Multi-program Survey (MPS; formerly called Employee Coordinated Survey) included nine items designed to assess the level of adoption of the CARES initiative and to understand how the CARES message was communicated. This set of items originated with recommendations made by the Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) to CARES's program directors in their collaborative work. The evaluation objectives for these items included:

- assess the current level of awareness of CARES, as awareness influences employees' likelihood of implementing CARES's standards
- collect data that can be used to inform a strategic communication plan and increase message adoption

One of the nine items on the MPS was open-ended and prompted respondents to describe what changes they noticed on their campus or in their department that aligned with CARES's standards. Results indicated many principals had prioritized use of Let's Talk, as noted by the responses of employees displayed in text bubbles below:

**Figure 2.**  
**Let's Talk average customer service satisfaction rating remained high even with the increase in dialogues in 2020–2021.**



Source. Let's Talk data 2019–2021



*Source:* Generated by Qualtrics Text IQ from responses to the 2020–2021 AISD MPS item “Have you seen changes at your school / in your department that support the CARES goals? If so, please describe.”

*We respond to Let's Talk, email and phone calls within the same workday.*

*Responding to Let's Talk is a priority.*

*We strive for a 10 on every Let's Talk submission.*

*What's changed is the relational practices we now use in Let's Talk...gives us more ability to access different customers.*

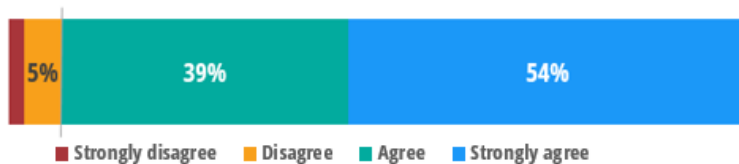
More than 90% of staff members who took the survey responded favorably to the following items (Figures 3 and 4):

- Our campus/department is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for students, families, staff, and community members.
- The decisions made at your campus / in your department align with the CARES customer service standards: customer-focused, action-oriented, responsive, empathetic, and service-driven.

Additionally, a majority of staff members responded favorably to questions about CARES (Figures 5 through 8).

Figure 3.

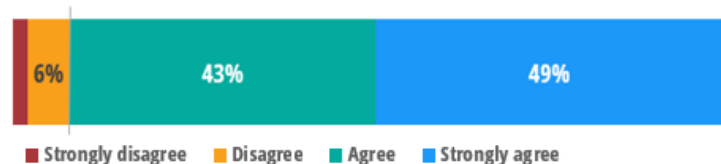
**Ninety-three percent of respondents ( $n = 4,086$ ) **Agree** or **Strongly agree** their campus/department is a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment for students, families, staff and community.**



Source: AISD MPS data, 2020–2021

Figure 4.

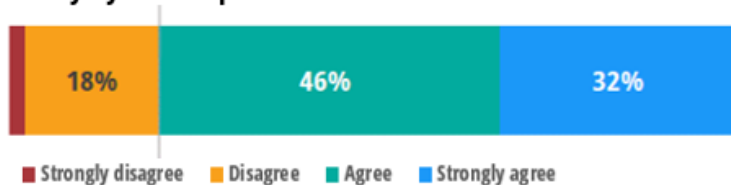
**Ninety-two percent of respondents ( $n = 4,065$ ) indicated they **Agree** or **Strongly agree** the decisions made at their campus/department aligned with the CARES standards.**



Source: AISD MPS data, 2020–2021

Figure 5.

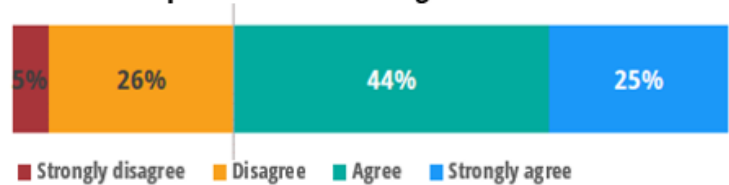
**Seventy-eight percent of respondents ( $n = 4,006$ ) **Agree** or **Strongly agree** that customer service goals and the expectations that went with them were communicated clearly by their supervisor.**



Source: AISD MPS data, 2020–2021

Figure 6.

**Sixty-nine percent of respondents ( $n = 3,958$ ) **Agree** or **Strongly agree** that their principal/supervisor encouraged them to complete a CARES training.**



Source: AISD MPS data, 2020–2021

Figure 7.

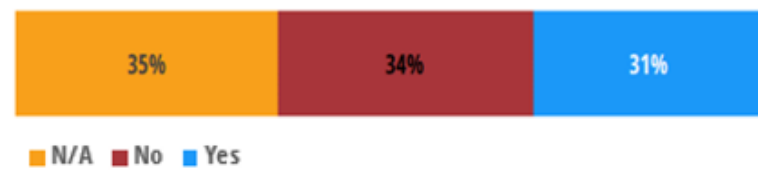
Eighty-three percent of respondents ( $n = 4,074$ ) were **A little** or **Very** aware of the CARES customer service goals in AISD.



Source. AISD MPS data, 2020–2021

Figure 8.

Thirty-one percent of respondents had seen changes at their campus/department that supported CARES customer service goals.



Source. AISD MPS data, 2020–2021

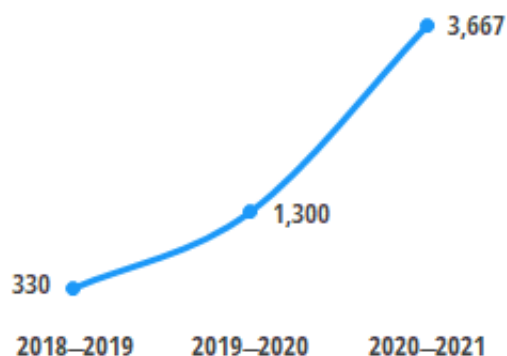
Emails also played a prominent role in sharing the message of the CARES initiative, as was indicated by responses to the question “I have received communication about AISD CARES customer service from the following sources; please select all that apply.” Sixty-one percent of the respondents that specified *Other* ( $n = 179$ ) answered with “AISD or CARES email.” Methods used to communicate the message about customer experience standards and CARES implementation activities also included a [one-page brief](#) prepared by DRE that was published and distributed in November 2020.

## Employee Recognition

Staff members received more Recognizing All Valuable Employees (RAVE) awards in the 2020–2021 school year than in previous years (Figure 9). RAVEs provide a way to publicly acknowledge an employee for outstanding service. A RAVE can be submitted through the AISD website by anyone. Employee recognition was identified as a priority in the 2020–2021 school year, as it aligned with the district’s goal of promoting employee well-being. Recognizing high-performing employees was also included as a recommendation in last year’s annual CARES Evaluation Brief (Minney, 2020).

Figure 9.

**AISD employees received more RAVEs recognizing exceptional service in 2020–2021 ( $n = 3,667$ ) than in the previous 2 years combined.**



Source. Let’s Talk data 2018–2021

*Employees are focused more on customer service than ever before and we can see the changes in the RAVE awards that are being issued for the staff.*

Results from the MPS indicated that staff members did indeed go out of their way to reach out, respond to, and serve the AISD students and community. This was evidenced by employees’ comments in the open-ended text field survey items, an example of which is displayed in the text bubble to the left.



## Professional Learning

At least 1,570 attendees participated in and completed one of the CARES professional learning sessions provided online through the Human Capital Platform (HCP). These results are displayed Table 1. Additionally, CARES responded to ad hoc requests for professional learning opportunities, which included an orientation to CARES's standards, and job-specific customer service procedures.

These included the following:

- provided a “Welcome to Let’s Talk” professional learning session for the Department of Student Services
- facilitated a customer service orientation for parent support specialists for the student enrollment campaign
- customer service orientations were provided for the student enrollment team

Table 1.

**At least 1,570 employees completed professional development provided by CARES throughout the 2020–2021 school year.**

Training title	Participants completed
<b>Creating an Exceptional Customer Service Experience</b>	<b>508</b>
<b>Customer Service for Teachers &amp; Other Staff: Communicating with Families &amp; Caregivers</b>	<b>618</b>
<b>CARES Customer Service</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>CARES Certificate Training</b>	<b>387</b>

Source. AISD HCP data July 1, 2020–June 30, 2021

## Progress Monitoring

The CARES team conducted many activities that created an environment conducive to positive interactions. For example, they hosted an ice cream social for Employee Appreciation Day, provided support for staff COVID-19 vaccine events, decorated AISD headquarters with swag and signage during PRIDE week, and engaged in many other impromptu support and staff celebration activities.

AISD gathers data on perceptions and experiences related to the CARES standards and messaging from staff members, families, and students in the form of three annual surveys:

- Teaching, Empowering, Learning, Leading (TELL) Survey
- Family Survey
- Student Climate Survey (SCS)

Several items from these surveys are tracked as a means to monitor CARES implementation and impact.

*More front office staff direction and training, and there are regular discussions when something did not go as it should have.*

*The AISD CARES team has created training and support that has been very useful.*

Principals were able to review the responses to items related to customer service for their particular campus on their eCST dashboard, which was one method of providing them with formative feedback. Populating these dashboards with campus-specific data and sharing them with principals was a recommendation in last year's evaluation summary, as it allowed principals to monitor their progress in providing customer service. The Family Survey average overall results improved since school year 2019–2020 at the elementary school (ES), middle school (MS), and high school (HS) levels in the responses to the following questions:

- I am treated with courtesy and respect by the principal.
- My involvement is welcomed by the principal.

Figures 10 and 11 display family/guardians' ratings of principals at ES, MS, and HS. Additionally, the SCS included five questions regarding campus climate and went to all students in grades 3 through 12. Overall, 29,789 students responded, and averages at all levels increased (Figure 12). A list of the items is shown in the panel on the next page.

Figure 10.

**The average response to the question "I am treated with courtesy and respect by the principal" increased since 2019-2020.**

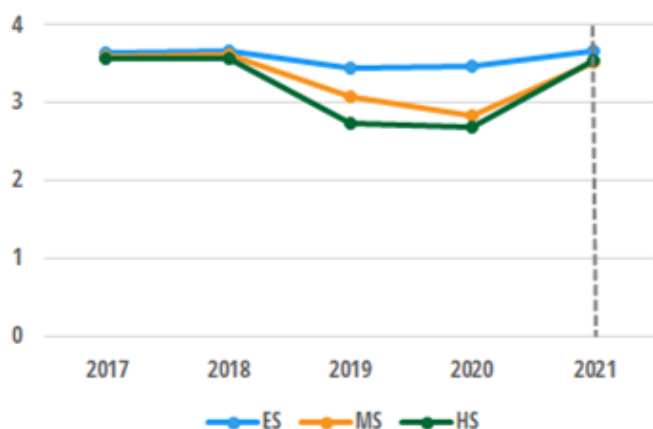
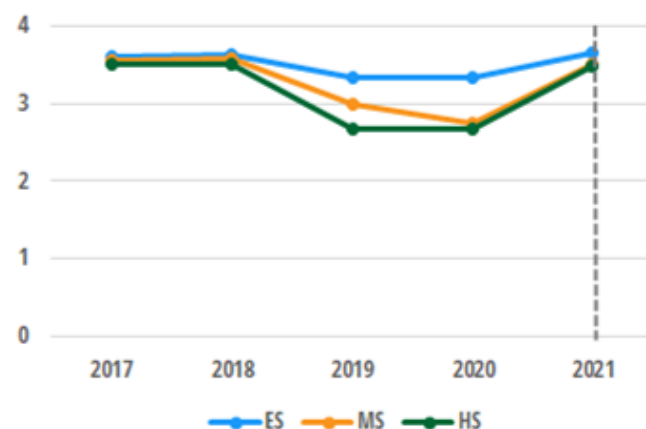


Figure 11.

**The average response to the question "My involvement is welcomed by the principal" increased since 2019-2020.**

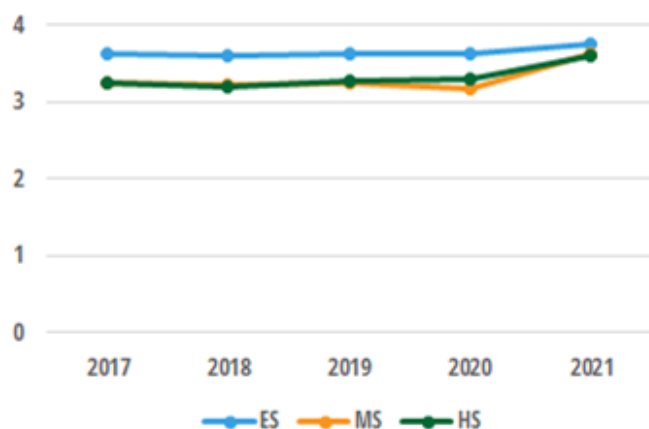


Source. AISD Family Survey data 2017–2021

Note. The school year is indicated by the year of the second semester (i.e., 2021 refers to school year 2020–2021).

Figure 12.

**The average student response to the question "Adults at my school treat all students fairly" increased since 2019-2020.**



Source. AISD Student Climate Survey data 2017–2021

On the TELL Survey, which goes out to teachers and other campus-based staff members, responses to all six customer service-related questions also increased since school year 2019–2020. All six questions can be seen in the side panel.

## COVID-19 Impact

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted many aspects of the 2020–2021 school year. With the majority of students choosing virtual learning, campus staff worked hard to overcome obstacles to learning. AISD’s annual CARES reports usually included displaying campus composite scores which consisted of campus assessments, walk-throughs, and mystery calls to campus staff. No campus assessments were conducted in the 2020–2021 school year, however.

Creating a logic model outlining specific inputs, activities, outputs, and program goals was specified in the evaluation plan to take place in school year 2020–2021. However, program directors determined this activity should be moved to the evaluation plan for school year 2021–2022, based on the shift in priorities caused by COVID-19. The number of ad hoc requests, along with the exponential increase in Let’s Talk dialogues were prioritized by necessity.

## Expanding Accessibility

The CARES team effectively formed project-based partnerships with departments within AISD to provide information and service to more people. These partnerships included the following:

- Student Support Services
- Health Services
- Professional Learning
- External entities, such as other school districts and former students

In the interest of accessibility, the CARES team also did important implementation work to expand the Let’s Talk platform to each campus. When Let’s Talk originally launched, the district website was the only access point to communicate through the platform. As a result of partnering with campus staff, many campuses now have their own Let’s Talk link on their campus website and Let’s Talk texting capability. The CARES team was able to connect with many families and respond to their needs via text, which is a preferred method of communication for many in the AISD community.

## Scorecard Indicator

Much of the implementation evaluation work involved creating new indicators for the district to gauge CARES’s success. The indicators for the previous school year (2019–2020) relied heavily upon campus composite score. In school year 2019–2020, the majority of campuses (110 out of 119) in the district surpassed the expected score of 75%, with an overall average of 89%.

In school year 2020–2021, conducting campus audits was not a reasonable expectation due to the pandemic. Furthermore, the CARES team was directed to reimagine how customer service progress could be assessed. For this reason, DRE conducted a thorough analysis of all current customer service survey items, and proposed new items in collaboration with CARES’s program directors. These items, as well as a new customer service index, aligns with the district strategic plan and will be introduced in school year 2021–2022.

## District-wide Surveys in AISD

AISD annually administers district-wide surveys to parents/caregivers (the Family Survey), students (the SCS), and campus staff (the TELL Survey). These surveys offer the AISD community an opportunity to provide input and feedback.

### Customer service items from the SCS:

1. Teachers at this school care about their students.
2. Adults at my school treat all students fairly.
3. The staff in the front office show respect to students.
4. My teachers are fair to everyone.
5. At my school, there is respect for different cultures.

### Customer service items from the TELL Survey:

1. All campus staff are willing to go out of their way to help.
2. All campus staff accomplish their jobs with enthusiasm.
3. Parents/guardians are influential decision makers in this school.
4. This school maintains clear, two-way communication with the community.
5. This school does a good job of encouraging parent/guardian involvement.
6. Teachers provide parents/guardians with useful information about student learning.

## Summary and Recommendations

CARES increased its activities and engagement with AISD staff, families, and community members in school year 2020–2021, and its capacity to deliver customer experience grew in unexpected ways. This was evident from the dramatic increase in Let’s Talk! dialogues; the increase in RAVEs received by staff members; and the improvement in customer service feedback as exemplified by results from multiple district-wide surveys. Additionally, the CARES team pursued an inquiry into levels of message dissemination and adoption throughout the district and can potentially use these formative data to guide future key communication strategies and implementation goals. Collecting this type of data is an important step toward creating a strategic communication plan for greater awareness of and adoption of CARES initiatives, such as employee recognition. This information can inform future staff meetings and professional learning.

The collaboration with DRE will continue in school year 2021–2022, as use of the new index is monitored and progress toward CARES’s goals is continually reported to stakeholders. Recommendations for the AISD CARES customer service model are that it continue to be evaluated and expanded in the following areas:

- **Inform:** use progress monitoring feedback to inform a strategic plan in alignment with district initiatives (e.g., employee recognition, retention, and well-being).
- **Evaluate:** gather data on staff’s responses to, perceptions of, and implementation of the new campus rubric, assessment tools, and campus improvement plans (CIP’s), as well as their responses to, and perceptions of, the customer experience index, and employee recognition.
- **Expand:** continue to explore and assess methods of increasing accessibility to Let’s Talk!

## References

- Minney, D. (2020). *CARES 2019–2020 evaluation: A brief review of the second year of implementation*. (DRE Publication 19.56). Austin Independent School District. [https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dre-surveys/rb/19.56\\_CARES\\_2019%E2%80%932020\\_Evaluation\\_A\\_Brief\\_Review.pdf](https://www.austinisd.org/sites/default/files/dre-surveys/rb/19.56_CARES_2019%E2%80%932020_Evaluation_A_Brief_Review.pdf)
- Rogers, E. M., Medina, U. E., Rivera, M. A., & Wiley, C. J. (2005). Complex adaptive systems and the diffusion of innovations. *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 10(3), 1-26.

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November 2021

Publication 20.32