

# CARES 2019–2020 Evaluation: A Brief Review of the Second Year of Implementation

## Introduction

Austin Independent School District's (AISD) CARES program, now in its second year of implementation, maintained and in many cases exceeded high-quality standards, while experiencing a dramatic increase in volume and activity. In addition, the program continued to maintain its current progress monitoring activities, continued to offer campus and Central Office staff support, and even expanded aspects of the feedback functions of the program. From March 13 through the end of the 2019–2020 school year, AISD schools closed and all students shifted to virtual learning in response to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, and as part of their vision to provide support and service to AISD families, students, and staff, the CARES team quickly adapted and found innovative ways to implement service activities during this time of transition. CARES and the Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) also decided to modify or forego certain evaluation activities. This report highlights these accomplishments and activities.

## Background

Administrators created the CARES program with hopes of bringing about a culture of positive relationships through delivery of exceptional customer service for students, families, community members, and AISD employees. A positive organizational culture is known to increase staff well-being and retention (Brackett & Baron, 2018) and to improve the use of evidence-based practices in the classroom (Cook et al., 2016), and is linked to positive student outcomes (Rahm & Heise, 2019). To help attain these outcomes, the CARES team delivers training, empowers campus staff and leaders to implement the CARES principles, and systematically uses data to affect change and drive positive outcomes.

AISD leadership has identified three areas of growth: quality-teacher retention, improved student outcomes, and student enrollment. An improvement in customer service, due to a culture of respect and caring, can support achievement of all three objectives. When teachers experience positive support, acknowledgment, and well-being while at work, they are more likely to stay and to have students with positive outcomes. Therefore, a supportive environment and positive interactions help the district to make progress toward these three objectives.

## Program Design

In the first year of implementation, 2018–2019, the CARES team collaborated with DRE to work on program design and implementation planning. Since programs of this nature usually are expected to mature around the third year (Durlak & DuPre, 2008), impact evaluation was not a priority. Therefore, evaluation activities in the first year of implementation consisted of forming a theory of change, creating a vision statement, identifying program goals, helping to compile resources, and gathering baseline data to use for later comparisons. [DeBaylo and Hutchins](#) (2019), describes CARES's first-year activities.

## 2019–2020 Key Implementation Goals and Expectations

In the school year 2019–2020, the CARES implementation goals reflected AISD district leaders’ decision to review existing practices, with an eye toward equity. For example, expanding Let’s Talk!, an online communication platform, and making it available at the campus level would strategically align with equitable practices for ensuring all voices are welcome and valued. Therefore, one implementation goal was to expand the Let’s Talk! platform to each individual campus, instead of only having one access point to the platform on the district website.

A second implementation goal was to deploy front office customer service surveys through use of quick response (QR) codes at a limited number of schools to pilot the surveys. This is an example of providing equitable access for any student, parent, community, or staff member to voice a question, concern, or compliment. Additional implementation goals listed in Table 1 are organized into six primary areas of focus: (a) feedback, (b) training, (c) resources, (d) communication, (e) recognition, and (f) progress monitoring.

Table 1  
**CARES Key Implementation Goals for School Year 2019–2020**

Focus area	Goals
Feedback	Meet scorecard indicator for customer service scores of at least 60% of campuses receive 75% or more, expand Let’s Talk! platform for accessibility, launch QR code front office polls
Training	Deliver CARES training, and create and deliver specialized departmental CARES trainings
Resources	Expand CARES principal toolkit, and CARES front office staff toolkit, distribute resources for new employees
Communication	Publish and distribute paper highlighting customer service benefits, conduct focus groups to understand principal perceptions
Recognition	Highlight employee appreciation by increasing number of RAVEs awarded
Progress monitoring	Produce evaluation reports, continue to provide dashboards for principals, conduct survey customer service item analysis

## Implementation and Evaluation Results

Researchers suggest at least 3 years are required before major school- or district-wide reforms are ready for an impact evaluation. Program evaluations conducted before implementation and organizational capacity are sufficiently established will not accurately reflect the true impact of the program (Felner et al., 2001). Therefore, data were collected for the purpose of providing a baseline to make subsequent comparisons with and to document trends over time.

### Second-Year Baseline Comparisons

Implementation data collected that was related to the six areas of focus demonstrated improvement since 2018–2019.

## CARES Vision and Purpose

### Vision:

Austin ISD will embrace a culture of positive relationships through the creation of exceptional customer service for students, families, community members and each other.

### Purpose:

AISD CARES aligns with Core Belief 2 from the AISD 2015–2020 Strategic Plan, with a particular emphasis on Commitment 6 which states:

“AISD will commit to creating a positive organizational culture that values customer service and every employee.”

CARES’ purpose also aligns with Core Belief 3 from the AISD 2015–2020 Strategic Plan, and particularly to Commitment 9, which states:

“AISD is committed to engaging authentically with students, parents/guardians, teachers, and community.”

In addition to establishing AISD CARES, customer service was also included as part of the 2015–2020 Strategic Plan and contained in the 2018–2019 scorecard and 2019-2020 scorecard within Constraint 2 (i.e. items CPM 2.1, CPM 2.2, and CPM 2.3).

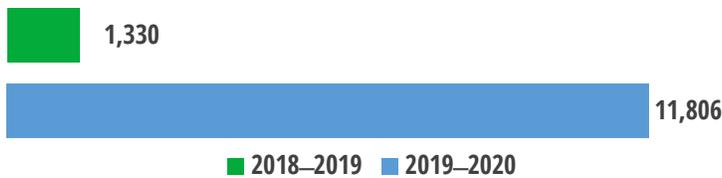
## Feedback

Evaluation analysis revealed implementation of CARES key goals went as planned, except for modifications that were needed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. CARES supported campuses with feedback and training to improve their customer service scores. Additionally, average ratings on the Let’s Talk! feedback tool, even while receiving hundreds of dialogues per day, remained steadily at 8.2 out of 10, and, the majority (67%) were responded to within one day.

### Let’s Talk!

The Let’s Talk! communication tool enabled CARES staff to respond to families and staff members’ questions, issues and challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the school year (i.e., from August 1, 2019, to July 31, 2020), the CARES team received 11,806 dialogues through Let’s Talk!. As of the end of January 2020, they had received 4,000. Therefore, they received nearly 8,000 in a 6-month time period, an increase from the 1,330 received in the entire 2018–2019 school year, as displayed in Figure 1. Even with this increase in volume, the CARES team received consistently high customer service ratings (Figure 2).

**Figure 1**  
Dialogues received through the Let’s Talk! platform increased from 1,330 to 11,806 in 2019–2020.



**Figure 2**  
Customer service feedback ratings for Let’s Talk! remained consistently high.



Sources. Let’s Talk! 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 data, and Let’s Talk! Fall 2020 data

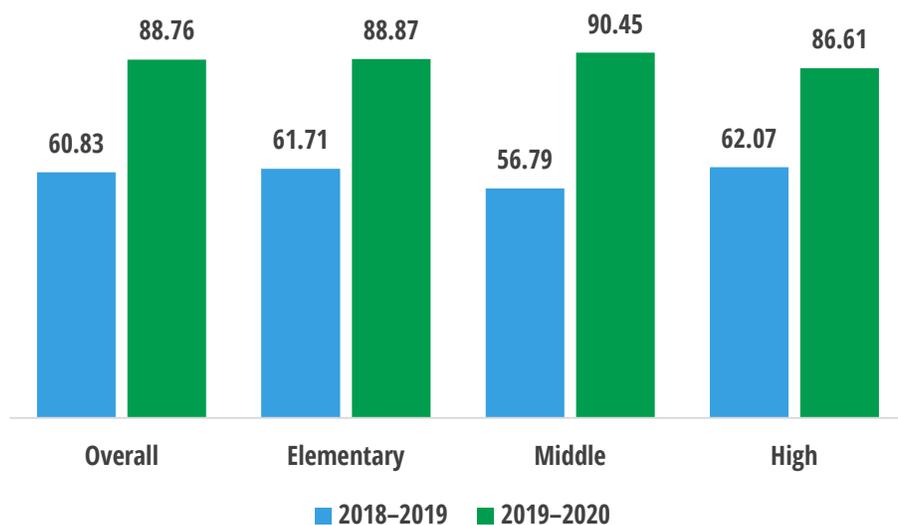
### Campus Composite Customer Service Scores

The AISD scorecard indicator (CPM2.2) for improvement from school year 2018–2019 to 2019–2020, on average, for the district and for each level was met. The percentage of campuses scoring 75% or more on the AISD campus composite customer service score was expected to increase from 8% to 60% in 2019–2020. The actual result by far exceeded this expectation; 110 schools out of 119 received an overall score of 75% or better, meaning the scorecard indicator increased from 8.3% in 2018–2019 to 92.4% in 2019–2020. The campus CARES customer service evaluation includes customer service campus walkthroughs, mystery calls, and a campus audit conducted by the CARES team. Figure 3 displays the overall average campus customer service composite scores for the district and for each level.



Figure 3

The overall average campus composite customer service score improved from 60.83 in school year 2018–2019 to 88.76 in 2019–2020, exceeding scorecard indicators.



Source. CARES 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 data

## CARES Quick Response Front Office Customer Service Survey

As stated in the implementation goals, feedback mechanisms for customer service were expanded. Five pilot campuses were selected to have front office QR code surveys unique to their campus: three elementary schools (ES), one middle school (MS), and one high school (HS). Between November 2019 and March 13, 2020, when all campuses transitioned to at-home learning, 61 responses from parents and staff were received. The average customer service experience rating was 4.9 on a scale of 0 to 5.

## Principal Dashboards

CARES dashboards for campus principals to access their current campus and district data related to scorecard indicators continued to be updated. Principals could access customer service audit data; Human Resources (HR) Exit Survey data; Family Leaver Survey data; staff's completion of AISD CARES training; and select items from the Teaching, Empowering, Leading, and Learning (TELL) Survey, Family Survey, and Student Climate Survey.

## Training

At least 1,900 AISD employees completed at least one training, while some employees completed all three. Training implementation work included developing online and face-to-face AISD CARES training, offering individualized trainings to departments upon request, developing customer service orientation training, delivering CARES audit training for principals, and delivering Let's Talk! training to points of contact. Three online trainings were developed and made accessible in the Human Capital Platform (HCP).

Additionally, 14 requests were made by various departments for specialized hybrid trainings, more than twice the number delivered during the 2018–2019 school year. These consisted of CARES principles and job-specific customer service procedures. Training implementation is an important element in any new program's successful implementation due to its impact on organizational capacity (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). Table 2 shows enrollment for the three signature trainings. An itemized list of specialized trainings delivered by CARES is available upon request.

Table 2

About 1,900 AISD employees completed at least one training, and some of them completed two or three.

Training title	Participants completed
Creating an Exceptional CS Experience	1,113
Customer Service for Teachers & Other Staff: Communicating with Parents & Caregivers	1,225
CARES Certificate Training	955

Sources. CARES HCP 2019–2020 data

## Resources

The resources implementation work of CARES in 2019–2020 involved continuing to distribute the CARES principals’ toolkit, creating a CARES front office staff toolkit, and creating onboarding materials for new employees. All of these resources are available upon request. Additionally, DRE published a report that highlighted the benefits of school districts embracing a culture of customer service and that the CARES team distributed to stakeholders ([DeBaylo & Minney, 2019](#)).

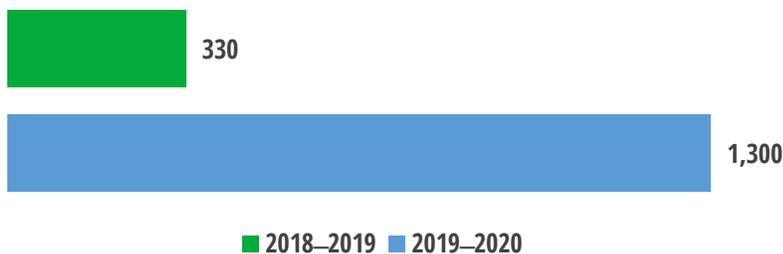
In 2019–2020, 12 Constant Contact email blasts were sent out to AISD staff, targeting either all AISD employees (i.e., ~13,000 staff) or all 230/260-day contract employees. This is twice as many as were sent in 2018–2019. CARES communicated customer service standards to campus staff through emails and by promoting the CARES website. The CARES team used Constant Contact emails to reach AISD staff with customer service reminders, such as summer schedules and appropriate voicemail/email out-of-office language. The additional email messages consisted of content related to CARES customer service week, remote work notifications and voicemail, and open-for-learning email signature guidance.

## Recognition

In the 2019–2020 school year, 1,300 AISD employees received a RAVE award (Figure 4). This number increased from 330 in the previous year and fulfilled the CARES key implementation goal of highlighting employee appreciation. The RAVE program was established to publicly honor those who exemplify the highest level of customer service in AISD. AISD employees are nominated for a [RAVE](#) award through the AISD CARES website by someone who had an exceptional experience interacting with the employee. Increasing employee recognition was a key implementation goal of CARES’ 2019–2020 work.

Figure 4

The number of RAVEs awarded to AISD employees increased from 330 in 2018–2019 to 1,300 in school year 2019–2020.



Source. CARES 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 data

## Progress Monitoring: Customer Service Perception Surveys

Responses for items on AISD surveys related to climate and customer service did not reveal any major difference from the first year of CARES implementation in AISD (2018–2019). These surveys, TELL, Student Climate Survey, and the Family Survey, are distributed each year to gather data on staff’s, families’, and students’ perceptions. DRE began tracking specific questions related to perceptions on campus climate and respect in order to document trends over time. A complete description of these results is available upon request.

Responses to six questions on TELL, the survey for campus staff, were similar to 2018–2019, with a slight increase on average for staff at special campuses. Similarly, for the student survey, across all five survey items, average students’ ratings were similar to previous school years, except at special campuses where there was a general trend of improvement, especially since school year 2018–2019 (Figure 5). On two questions, student ratings declined slightly at the MS level. Lastly, average ES ratings for the Family Survey were somewhat similar to those from 2018–2019, and average MS ratings dropped slightly (Figure 6).

Figure 5

**Students’ responses improved slightly at special campuses for the item, “At my school, there is respect for different cultures.”**

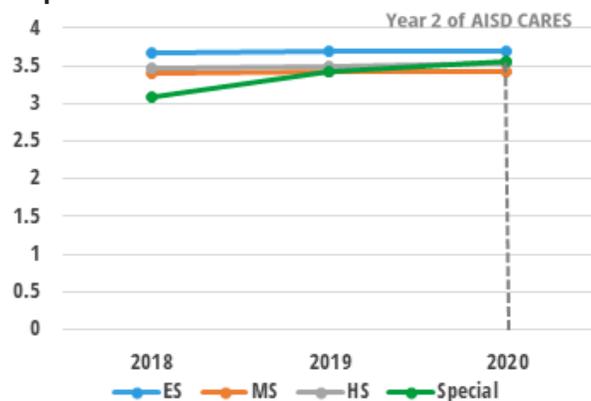
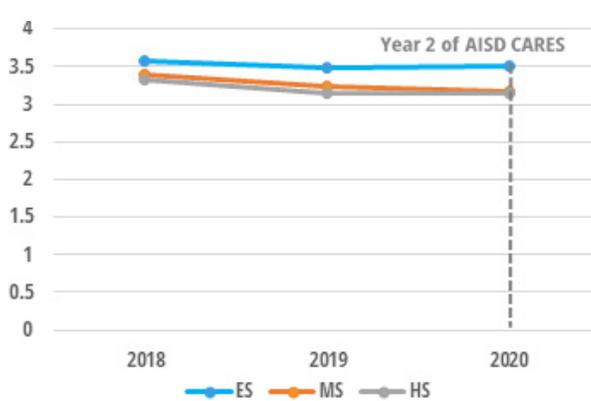


Figure 6

**Average responses were similar to previous year for the Family Survey item, “I consistently receive good customer service.”**



Sources. Student Survey 2017–2018, 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 data, and Family Survey 2017–2018, 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 data

Note. Special campuses on the Student Climate Survey include: ALC, Clifton, EDAEP, International High School, and Garza. For the Family Survey, data from special campuses were calculated with averages at campus level; therefore no category for special campuses data exists for this survey.

In addition, two new survey questions were added to the TELL Survey and the Central Office Climate Survey (COC). These questions were added to gather information about what makes staff members feel valued in their positions, as well as whether they chose to stay in their position in AISD, or leave. If they chose to stay, the survey asked for their reasons, and if they chose to leave, the survey prompted the respondent to provide their reasons for doing so. Results of this analysis indicated high percentages of employees both on campuses (93%), and at Central Office (96%) plan to stay in their position in AISD (DeBaylo & Minney, 2020).

## Adaptations Due to COVID-19

Even with the disruption of planned activities due to the pandemic, the CARES programming and evaluation teams were both able to perform most planned activities, and in many cases, performed additional and/or modifications of the activities originally planned for school year 2019–2020. For example, CARES adapted the campus customer service scoring procedures due to the transition to online learning in spring of the 2019–2020 school year.

Since campuses were closed from March 13 on, campuses received only one audit instead of two (one in fall, one in spring), which made up half of their score. Also, since most campuses were unable to conduct a campus walk-through in the spring, all campuses were gifted, or automatically given, 10 points, (i.e., the equivalent of one walk-through). Therefore, each campus received at least 10 out of a possible 20 points for that component, even if they had done no walk-throughs. Thirdly, each campus received only two mystery calls, instead of three, so the means of their two scores, instead of the usual three, were used for this component of their total score.

As mentioned in the Feedback section, the use of Let’s Talk! expanded widely in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in response to community needs. Among the adaptations, CARES team members responded to and routed thousands of questions and concerns Let’s Talk! regarding human resources, at-home instruction, access to technology, pickup and distribution of meals, and feedback about the surveys. Since the Let’s Talk! communication tool proved so effective in organizing resources and providing a crucial touch-point to concerned staff and family members, implementation activities to expand use of the tool is planned for school year 2020–2021.

## Summary and Recommendations

CARES made major strides forward in continuing to successfully implement planned programs in six areas of focus, and the CARES team proved innovative and responsive to district needs during the pandemic. Increasing the number of specialized trainings delivered through HCP, making the feedback tools more accessible, and adapting audit procedures fairly and equitably so that no campus would be adversely affected by the inability to conduct walk-through evaluations are just some of the innovative ways CARES responded to the crisis and supported families and staff in AISD.

Implementation activities and evaluation activities aligned with the 2019–2020 superintendent’s initiative regarding building a culture of respect. The AISD CARES customer service model in 2020–2021 will continue to be evaluated, and expanded, with actions focusing on (a) executing a strategic communication plan to create greater awareness of CARES initiatives and recognition of high-performing employees and campuses; (b) providing more formative feedback to principals; (c) implementing Let’s Talk! on campuses, as needed, and (d) developing additional trainings for both new hires and incumbents that embed components of cultural proficiency, equity, and AISD customer service standards.

Stakeholders should continue to be informed about the purpose and goals of CARES, and should be afforded the opportunity to provide feedback on their perceptions. As the advice from government and health officials is received throughout the coming school year, Let’s Talk! and other CARES tools shall be adapted and used in response to new requests and needs of the district. Lastly, more information in the form of a strategic communication and promotion plan regarding the importance of fostering a culture focused on high-quality customer service as a means to achieve positive organizational and student outcomes should be provided to stakeholders to increase clarity and buy-in.

## Campus Composite Customer Service Score

Each campus undergoes a customer service evaluation process with 3 components making up their total customer service score:

- Audit 50%
- Mystery Calls 30%
- Self-assessment 20%

Customer service audits were conducted in-person by a district customer service specialist. Campuses are expected to receive 2 audits (one in fall and one in spring), 3 mystery calls, and to conduct 2 self-assessment walk-throughs on their campus. This rubric was adapted, however, due to the transition to virtual learning from March 13 through the end of the 2019–2020 school year.

Therefore, each campus’ overall score was calculated with 1 audit, and 2 mystery calls. Additionally, campuses were gifted 10 points to count toward a walk-through, since the opportunity to do so was much shorter than expected. Detailed results of campus’ composite scores are available upon request.

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December 2020

Publication 19.56