

Who Cares about CARES?

We do! And you should too!

Customer Experience in AISD

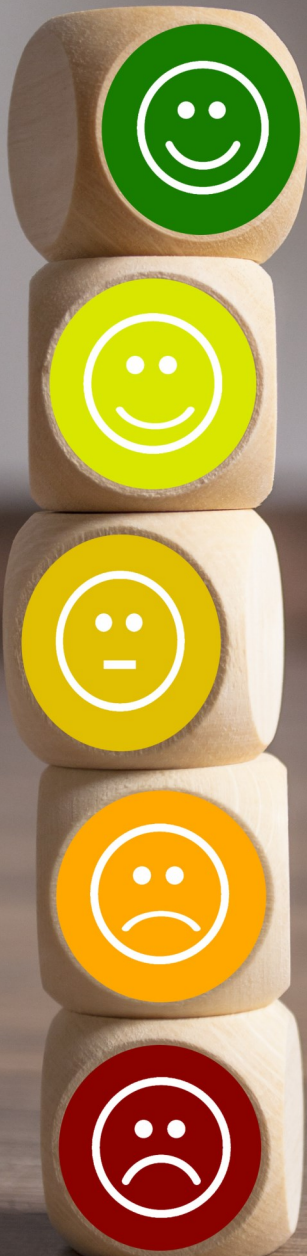
If you worked on an Austin Independent School District (AISD) campus in 2018–2019, you may have heard the acronym CARES, the new customer-service initiative our district has adopted. It may seem out of place for a school district to refer to students, their families, and community members as customers, but terms such as this are becoming more common. You may hear the phrases “market-driven,” “employee engagement,” or even “customer relationship management (CRM)” when talking about schools.

It makes sense, too. In our current reality, “likes,” Yelp reviews, and Google results have a huge influence on how we make daily decisions. The exceptional customer experience AISD provides to our stakeholders—both staff and community members within AISD—is our way of ensuring that all individuals who interact with our campuses or central office come away from the exchange feeling positive and adequately helped. Why we need to start paying more attention to the concept of customer service is that, just like in a business, when customer experience declines, many consequences can follow. Customer experience affects many of the outcomes AISD and schools around the country care about, such as student enrollment (which therefore influences school funding and how many jobs can be supported), parental engagement, and staff retention.

Let’s face it, school districts have become a very competitive marketplace now that families have more and more options for where to send their children to school. Universities have already recognized this fact and are ramping up their efforts to provide exceptional customer service as a means to recruit and maintain students (Boyd, 2012). Additionally, one reason charter and private schools were thought to experience skyrocketing enrollment rates (e.g., up 60% and continuing to grow between 2010 and 2015) was that they provided better engagement opportunities for families and community members (Archambault, 2008; Kominiak, 2018). To address increases in school choice and stronger community engagement in charter and private schools, AISD implemented AISD CARES, to strengthen our interactions with stakeholders to create an engaging, positive environment for our students, families, and the community.

Poor customer service can be the starting point for an adverse domino effect. Once students’ families decide to leave the district, the next domino (funding) falls, then teachers start to lose their jobs; staff morale sinks; and worst of all, student outcomes suffer.

In AISD we have a plan to help create a positive environment for all and prevent families from choosing to leave the district. And that plan is AISD CARES!



How does it work?

Here are a few things that make our stakeholders feel cared for and make them feel their child is in a caring environment:

- Staff **warmly welcomes** students, parents, community members, and each other on campus, over the phone, and through email.
- Teachers and other staff **express empathy and understanding** when a parent or community member voices a concern.
- Parents and the community are invited to **participate in decision-making** meetings and invited to give input, when possible.

How does it benefit?

If you are still asking yourself “Why should I care?”, consider some of the benefits of providing a caring and inclusive atmosphere where our stakeholders feel welcome and understood:

Benefits of satisfied students, families, and community:

- Satisfied families are more likely to remain in our schools, which can lead to **higher enrollment** and therefore **greater funding** for the school (Chambers, 1998; Kominiak, 2018).
- Parents are more **positively engaged** (Hennig-Thurau, 2004).
- When interpersonal relationships and the social-emotional climate within schools and the community are based on quality, consistency, and appropriate behavior modeling, **students’ learning and achievement** can be positively influenced (Kennedy, Goolsby, & Arnould, 2003; Maxwell, Reynolds, Lee, Subasic, & Bromhead, 2017; Patti, Senge, Madrazo, & Stern, 2015).

Benefits of satisfied staff:

- Employees report having **higher job satisfaction** when they have positive interactions with customers, and vice versa (Delisio, 2019; Kennedy et al., 2003).
- Employees are **more committed to their organizations** when those organizations are geared toward satisfying their customers’ needs (Delisio, 2019; Hennig-Thurau, 2004).
- Employees are **more engaged** in their job and **willing to go the extra mile** for their customers when customer satisfaction is prioritized (Anaza & Rutherford, 2012).
- Not only does having caring relationships lead to student retention, it also means **teachers are more likely to stay in the district** (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014; Tye & O’Brien, 2002).

One final note, in case you think your school can’t provide customer service and relationship building with students, families, community members, and each other remember... it is already doing so! Whether you are aware of it or not, every day, staff on your campus are interacting and creating impressions with the student body and community at large. Why not make these interactions intentionally warm and inviting? Yes, it can be a challenge, and you have other pressing challenges already. However, in this case, the benefits are clearly worth it. Imagine if your school could stay

fully staffed, was easily able to fund much-needed services, and had a culture of active and engaged community members? AISD continues to focus on fostering a culture of respect, as outlined in the *Superintendent's Initiatives for 2019–2020*. CARES is leading this charge to help AISD create a culture of positive relationships for all stakeholders. AISD CARES, and we want you to, too!

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