



**People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources**

**PODER's Young Scholars for Justice**

**City of Austin Youth Services Recommendations Report**

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## **PODER's Young Scholars for Justice City of Austin Youth Services Recommendations Report**

PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and her Resources) is a nonprofit environmental justice organization in East Austin. For the past 15 years, PODER has worked alongside other East Austin community residents to collectively advocate for improvements in environmental and social justice issues occurring in their neighborhoods.

PODER seeks to empower our community through education, advocacy, and action and believes that the future leaders, our youth, need to be at the forefront of all issues. PODER's Young Scholars for Justice (YSJ) was formed in 1995 and have since then been dedicated to the development of youth and young adults of color to address educational, environmental, economical, and social justice issues affecting them. The Young Scholars for Justice have addressed many areas of concern and have worked to create alternative solutions. Issues include a repeal on zero tolerance policies in public schools, voter registration drives, community health assessments around the Holly Power Plant and Tank Farms neighborhoods, gentrification housing forums, city council candidates forums, a bus riders' union, and surveys and recommendations for resource and gender equity in Austin Parks and Recreation's Department.

During the summer of 2006, PODER's Young Scholars for Justice participated in multiple projects including the creation of a Youth Services Forum. The Young Scholars for Justice first had a pilot Youth Services Forum at the PODER office and later recreated the same forum for other youth at Dove Springs Recreation Center in Southeast Austin. The purpose of the Youth Services Forum was to gather information about youth needs concerning services provided by the City of Austin. The YSJ focused on five youth services in Austin. These include youth employment, education, Parks and Recreation Department, arts and culture, and the Austin Police Department.

The following recommendations are a result of the two Youth Services Forums facilitated by PODER's Young Scholars for Justice.

### **Austin Parks and Recreation Department**

#### **Background Information**

PODER's YSJ have researched access and gender equity in the Parks and Recreation Department since the summer of 2002 due to a growing community concern about the access and availability of summer youth programs throughout Austin.

In 2002, the YSJ traveled to 7 recreation centers and 6 schools that were part of the Summer Teen Recreation Academy Program, totaling 13 site visits. They surveyed over 200 youth participants and 13 Park Directors. The goal of the visits was to learn about the needs and recommendations of Austin's youth and Park Directors to see if

appropriate equipment and supervision were offered and to determine whether there was equity in staff and Park Director employment.

The YSJ's research showed that there was a lack of young female participation in Parks and Recreation sponsored activities, and also that Park Directors were predominantly male. Based on this information, the YSJ made several recommendations during the summer of 2002. Some recommendations included the hiring of more female Park Directors for the purpose of increasing young female participation and gaining gender equity in employment, the hiring of a grant writer, increasing the Parks and Recreation Department's budget, and making weekend hours more accommodating for youth.

Because of their research findings and advocacy, PODER's YSJ received a proclamation Certificate of Congratulations in July of 2003 for their work to improve the Austin Parks and Recreation Department's summer programs. As a result of PODER's Young Scholar for Justice's recommendations, the Austin Parks and Recreation Department hired equal gender staff Park Directors.

Unfortunately, in the summer of 2004 and 2005, PODER's Young Scholars for Justice still did not see an increase in the Parks and Recreation's budget and continued to research the services offered. The YSJ concluded that improvements were still needed in the Parks and Recreation Department, especially in recreation centers located in East Austin.

The Parks and Recreation Department provides much needed services for all youth, especially youth of color and low-income youth. They offer activities that teach unity, team-building, discipline, confidence, as well as mental and health stability. So many low-to-moderate income families are struggling to provide the basic needs for their children. These families need and often depend on the structured summer programs and activities provided by the Parks and Recreation Department.

### **Recommendations**

Participants in PODER's Young Scholars for Justice's Youth Services Forum made the following recommendations to improve the Parks and Recreation Department services:

#### **SUMMER ACADEMIES**

- More options for activities (i.e. board games and a greater variety of teams and clubs)
- All activities in summer teen academies should be affordable or free when possible

#### **YEARLY ACADEMIES**

- A greater variety of activities offered for teens (i.e. talent shows)
- Active indoor activities other than basketball and pool should be offered (i.e. indoor racquetball)

## **SWIMMING LESSONS**

- Free summer swimming lessons offered at all recreation centers
- Swimming lessons should be offered in English and in Spanish.
- Bilingual informational material

## **GENDER – CATERED ACTIVITIES**

- More female-catered sports (i.e. football, softball, basketball, arts and crafts, and self-defense classes) in all recreation centers

## **HOURS OF OPERATION**

- Recommended hours of operation:  
Monday – Thursday 12:00pm-8:00pm and Friday – Saturday 2:00pm-11:00pm
- Givens is closed for this summer and needs to be opened up soon.
- Zaragosa Recreation Center needs to be open on Sundays.

## **FACILITIES**

- All facilities need more and better equipment including volleyball nets, tennis rackets, and inflated balls.
- A computer lab is needed at Givens Recreation Center

## **Youth Employment**

### **Background Information**

PODER's Young Scholars for Justice feel that youth employment is an important necessity in Austin. Youth are no longer looking for jobs to get paid; they are now looking for jobs that will offer real life skills training. Youth participants at the Youth Services Forum mentioned that employers look for work experience as hiring criteria even though most youth are just beginning their work experiences at the age of 16. It is therefore impossible for them to have a long résumé of work experience at such a young age. Youth also complained of false advertisement. They mentioned that when jobs are available there is often an age preference, and felt that agencies needed to be specific when searching for employees.

Youth participants at the Youth Services Forum said that they would like to be better prepared for college and that they want to enhance what they are already learning in middle and high school by applying these skills in their jobs. When discussing youth employment, the youth expressed that it is very difficult to find a job close to home and they would like to see jobs available in all parts of Austin and in close proximity to their places of residence. Youth also feel that transportation problems make it difficult for them to get to and from work. They talked about taking alternative modes of transportation such as riding a bike or taking the bus to work, especially on ozone action days because buses are free and cause less pollution than riding a car. Austin youth made several recommendations on improving youth employment services in the City of Austin.

### **Recommendations**

The following are the recommendations on youth employment offered by the City of Austin made by youth participants of the Youth Services forum:

#### **OUTREACH**

- The City of Austin needs better outreach in employing youth. Flyers should be posted in areas frequented by teens such as recreation centers, libraries, schools, and bus stops.
- Job fairs and job openings should be made available at the same locations as mentioned above and should also be advertised on popular youth web sites such as *MySpace* ([www.myspace.com](http://www.myspace.com))
- The City of Austin should have an online job search for Austin teens on the City of Austin web page.
- More summer employment programs are needed in schools or with local city offices where youth can learn real life skills.
- All schools in Austin should have a career planning and support center.

#### **LOCATIONS**

- Youth need to go to the places to find work but transportation is a barrier. The City of Austin or Capital Metro should offer discounted or free bus passes for youth who are traveling to their jobs.
- Schools should offer after-school and summertime employment for youth that attend that school.
- Youth need more jobs in East Austin that teach real life skills. Jobs should be available at recreation centers, libraries, schools, the mall, banks, theaters, doctors offices, photo labs, clinics, etc.
- Jobs need to be offered closer to community living spaces.

#### **LIVING WAGE**

- There should be more opportunities for a pay raise after a certain employment period.
- Living wage should be at or above \$8.00 an hour.

#### **TYPES OF POSITIONS**

- More paid internships or apprenticeships for high school students
- More trade jobs available in areas such as the culinary arts in order to prepare youth to become professionals in certain trade fields.
- More jobs that teach real life skills and prepare youth for college course work and everyday life
- Need positions that teach management skills and better on site job-trainings
- All positions should be hands-on type of work

## **Culture and Arts**

### **Background Information**

Austin prides itself on being the “Music Capital of the World,” yet youth feel that the music scene is non-existent in their communities. Youth of color say that they especially feel the burden, not only with music, but with culture and arts scene as a whole.

It is important for youth to know the real truth about their culture and to have opportunities to express themselves artistically. Adults in Austin have many opportunities for artistic expression, but youth feel that there is a lack of venues where they can share their talents, organizations that embrace their culture and expressions, free classes for youth only, and visiting artists that interest them in Austin’s music and art scenes.

### **Recommendations**

Arts and culture is one of the youth services that is most ignored by the City of Austin in funding and in availability – especially for youth of color. The following are the recommendations made by participants at PODER’s Young Scholars for Justice Youth Services Forum:

#### **CULTURE**

- Youth should have more dance and art classes offered to them by local organizations or city sponsored venues.
- Hill Side Concerts at the Pan Am Recreation Center should have more youth-catered music and activities.
- There should be a display area for youth art at all recreation center concerts.
- Music classes should be offered with concentrations in writing, performing, and recording music.
- Classes that interest youth need to be offered at all recreation centers, such as hip-hop dance, music recording, theater, and art (painting, drawing, and sculpture).

#### **VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES**

- More volunteer opportunities and outreach is needed
- The City of Austin should offer paid internships for youth in all culture and arts venues

#### **EVENTS**

- Dance and art classes need to be offered at events as part of a workshop during city sponsored activities involving culture and arts, such as the Hill Side Concerts at Pan Am Recreation Center.
- Need more Hip Hop Concerts and talent shows for youth
- Need more venues accessible to youth in East Austin to hold events

## **Austin Police Department**

### **Background Information**

There is a pervasive and historically driven pattern of excessive force, too many deaths, and an abuse of search powers in the City of Austin at the hands of the Austin Police Department (APD). Youth in Austin feel threatened and scared that Police Officers might hurt or even kill them, especially since the 2005 murder of the unarmed eighteen-year-old youth, Daniel Rocha.

Since the arrival of Chief Stan Knee in 1997, there have been fourteen deaths between 1998 and 2005. The police misconduct and violence suffered by communities of color stretches back decades and has created a profound lack of trust between Latinos and African Americans with APD. This racially defined gap is evident in the actions of civil rights organizations, neighborhood groups and people of color that question the integrity and unlawful discriminatory and sometimes lethal practices of APD.

On June 16, 2005 a public hearing was held at Dove Springs Recreation Center, 5801 Ainez Drive, in Austin, Texas regarding the shooting of Daniel Rocha. Over 300 people representing grassroots organizations, civil right groups, and area residents attended the hearing. East Austin residents demanded answers from the City and police and called for the resignation of Chief Stan Knee. Hundreds of people wanted to know why Officer Julie Schroeder shot Daniel Rocha in the back and at close range and why she didn't use her taser gun. In October 2003, APD adopted a more specific policy requiring officers to record all traffic and pedestrian stops with installed video cameras. The community was informed that Officer Schroeder did not activate the video camera. Community members have doubts as to whether the tape was discarded or erased. The focus of the community meeting was the unnecessary and excessive force, and even deaths, by police officers against people of color.

Police misconduct against youth of color encompasses more than unnecessary deaths and excessive force. The police also have a systematic practice of abusing their search powers to harass youth in the Latino and African American communities.

### **Recommendations**

Youth in Austin, especially youth of color, feel that the Austin Police Department has no accountability and is doing a poor job with youth and police officer relationships. Youth feel that safety is a top priority in their lives. Without the sense of safety in their own neighborhoods, youth feel that they will likely not go out looking for a job or be involved in extra-curricular activities. They do not fear other youth; they fear Austin's police officers. The following are recommendations made by youth participants in PODER's Young Scholars for Justice Youth Services Forum:

### **INTERACTION**

- There are an unnecessary number of police officers patrolling East Austin streets. This number should be decreased to lessen the intimidation and fear of youth walking and driving in their own neighborhoods.

- There needs to be less severe punishment for minor situations.
- Deadly force policy needs to be changed from shoot-to-kill to shoot-to-disable
- When a police officer stops a youth (or anyone), they need to make sure they warn the person that they have a lethal weapon rather than shooting unarmed people without a warning.
- There needs to be more education for youth to inform them of their rights in the situation that they are stopped by a police officer.

## **COMMUNITY OUTREACH**

- Police officers need to create a more positive presence in communities.
- Police officers should be involved in community programs and create bilingual flyers that can be mailed or available at local venues (recreation centers, grocery / shopping stores / gas stations, libraries) and sent through email to communicate with the neighborhoods where they are stationed.

## **GENDER / RACE**

- There are too many police officers patrolling East Austin, particularly, too many undercover cops and unidentified police vehicles. There needs to be more police identification in East Austin.
- Staff Representation-There needs to be more qualified female police officers and officers of color in the school system.
- Racial Profiling – there should be a policy on the negative impacts of racial profiling that all cops know about; this policy should be cited in their policies and procedures handbook. There should be more training for cops who have a record of racial profiling cases. These officers should be reprimanded for racial discrimination.

## **Education**

### **Background Information**

The Austin Independent School District, (AISD) has the largest percentage of low-performing schools in the state, and the student passing rate on the TAAS test is 10 points below the state average and 11 points below regional averages, according to the Texas School Performance Review (TSPR) report from the year 2000. This report also mentioned that AISD is one of the wealthiest school districts in Texas, yet it spends just 48 cents of every education dollar on classroom instruction. This is unacceptable, yet a realistic burden on youth who deserve a much better education and treatment in AISD.

Another area of concern is disciplinary conduct towards students. Although ensuring school safety should continue to be a top priority, zero tolerance policies and extreme security measures have done little to improve school safety or the academic achievement of students of color in AISD. Instead, these policies have increased racial inequities in education by profiling and unfairly punishing youth of color, which add to the increase in drop-out rates.

After over ten years of implementation around the country, and five as federal policy, there is little to no convincing evidence that zero tolerance has improved student behavior or overall school safety.

We are now seeing the early tracking of students as early as kindergarten with discretionary teacher and principal referrals. Our schools are beginning to look more like prisons. This campaign on zero tolerance towards drugs, weapons, violence, and even classroom disruptiveness has led to zero tolerance towards students of color. In Texas alone, 44% of Latinos drop out of HS compared to 41% Blacks and 24% Whites and the Austin Independent School District shows similar statistics.

In the academic school year of 2003 – 2004, AISD had enrollment of 13% African American, 53% Hispanic, 30% Anglo, and 3% other (Native American, Asian, etc). Home suspension and expulsions were at the highest rates for Hispanic and African American students than with Anglo students. For example, in AISD's Middle Schools, 61% of Hispanic students were suspended from school while only 13% of Anglos were suspended.

### **Recommendations**

PODER's Young Scholars for Justice and participants in PODER's YSJ's Youth Services Forum expressed the following concerns and recommendations for improving educational services provided by the Austin Independent School District:

#### **TEACHERS**

- All teachers should be certified in AISD.
- AISD needs more African American and Latino teachers.
- There should be a contract for teachers to stay a minimum of 3 years.
- There are too many students per teacher. AISD should limit the student-to-teacher ratio.
- There should be a limit to the number of first-year teachers per school. There are too many first year teachers in East Austin schools.
- AISD needs teachers that really teach, care, have positive attitudes, are respectful to students, are good listeners, and motivate students to go to college.

#### **FACILITIES**

- Johnston High School needs most of the improvements: (ie. Lockers are not being used by students and should be used, restrooms need to be cleaned regularly, the courtyard needs to be opened up again, overpopulation of students especially in the cafeteria needs improvement).
- Many schools in AISD are overpopulated and AISD should work on creating longer lunches with less people in the cafeterias.

#### **CURRICULUM**

- Youth need less book work and more hands on activities. There needs to be less focus on state testing.
- Johnston High School needs a summer school program on campus because students have to be taken to another high school across town.

- There is a lack of people of color history in AISD curriculum.
- More hands on curriculum is needed (e.g. museums trips, vocational courses, etc.)

#### **STAFF**

- Security guards use inappropriate actions with students (i.e. using aggressive force when unnecessary).
- All schools need more attentive counselors.
- Counselors need more outreach programs. There is a lack of funding for these programs.
- Johnston principals need to commit to staying for a minimum of three years on a signed contract.

#### **DISCIPLINE**

- In School Suspension (ISS) should be made more productive. There should be other alternatives to discipline such as peer mediation.
- School work needs to be tracked from the classroom to the In School Suspension classroom (e.g. At Mendez Middle School, schoolwork is not sent so students in ISS and students fall behind on coursework.)

#### **EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES**

- Youth should have more choices, better qualified teachers and/or sponsors, better outreach, and more female catered sports.
- More funding is needed for extra curricular activities.
- Transportation needs to be provided to practices and other extracurricular activities.

#### **COLLEGE PREPARATION**

- All schools should have a college-prep class and a career center. There needs to be more funding for these two things.
- Too many in-school programs are being cut. (i.e. Cine de las Americas was cut at Johnston High School)

#### **BILINGUAL EDUCATION**

- More and better bilingual outreach is needed for parents of bilingual students.
- Translated materials and human translators are needed at school meetings for Spanish speaking parents.

#### **HIGH SCHOOL REDESIGN**

- Freshman and sophomores should fill out surveys and the end of their senior year concerning how to more effectively “re-design” their schools. (e.g. Johnston High School students should fill out surveys at end of senior year on how academics can be improved.)

## **Conclusions**

PODER's Young Scholars for Justice feel that all services offered to youth are equally important in the lives of young people who will be our next generation of leaders. The City of Austin needs to prepare the future generation who will be our next wave of teachers, city officials, parents, secretaries, doctors, lawyers, and tax payers.

The YSJ's Youth Services Forum provided PODER and the youth in the YSJ program a glimpse of the lack of services offered for youth in Austin. Youth of color in East Austin are the ones who lack the majority of the services. We feel that in order to prepare a young person, a city needs to provide them with activities for health and personal growth development, adequate job opportunities that are in close proximity to their homes, culture and art awareness and opportunities for self-expression and finally, a police department that serves their job role to protect and not harm residents in Austin.

Please consider PODER's Young Scholars for Justice's and youth participants from Dove Springs Recreation Center's suggestions on improving youth services offered by the City of Austin. Do not forget that our youth are our most valuable resource for keeping Austin beautiful and just.