

Critical race theory, mental wellness among hot topics in EPISD District 6 trustee race

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11–14 minutes

Update: 11 a.m., April 17. This story has been updated to make it clear that critical race theory is not a part of the EPISD curriculum.

A contractor, a teacher, a businesswoman and a stay-at-home mom are facing off to fill the vacant District 6 seat on the El Paso Independent School District Board of Trustees.

The race comes months after the previous trustee, Freddy Khlayel-Avalos, stepped down in October, leaving the seven-person EPISD board to continue its duties with just six members. His term was set to end in May.

David Adams, Josie Castro Garcia, Jacqueline Martinez and Valerie Beals are running to represent campuses in the Franklin High School feeder pattern.

EPISD is the largest school district in the region with 50,333 students and a \$528 million budget. Trustees are tasked with setting policies and goals for the district, which are then implemented by the superintendent and administrators. They also adopt an annual budget and tax rate and are in charge of overseeing and evaluating the superintendent, who they have the power to hire and fire.

EPISD trustees serve four-year terms and don't have term limits. School board races are nonpartisan and trustees are not paid to serve. Early voting begins on April 24 and runs to May 2. Election Day is May 6.

David Adams

Though school board elections are nonpartisan, one candidate, Adams, is being endorsed by the Federated Republican Women of El Paso County. The political action committee has donated to several state Republican campaigns, including Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, Attorney General Ken Paxton and the state comptroller of public accounts Glenn Hegar.

Adams, 53, said he feels politics need to be taken out of the education system while voicing concerns over critical race theory

being taught in schools – a topic that is not a part of EPISD's curriculum.



David Adams

“In my perception, we’re trying to put into kids’ minds what we want them to know, not what has happened, and to me that’s wrong,” Adams said in a recent interview.

Critical race theory is an academic concept that studies how race and racism have impacted social and legal structures in the United States and is generally only taught in advanced college-level classes. Over the past year, GOP leaders have decried its teaching in public schools, culminating in new laws that passed during the 2021 legislative session that limits how Texas teachers can talk about current events and America’s history of racism in the classroom.

Though Adams said he does not think critical race theory is a part of the curriculum at EPISD, he hopes to keep it that way.

“We don’t want to see that happen, that’s why I’m running, so that makes sure that we don’t have CRT. If it’s infected in the district prior to me getting in there, I don’t know about it. But if it’s there, I’m going to make sure we do everything we can to remove it.”

Adams is the owner of A-1 Construction, Remodeling & Roofing, and is the only candidate in the race who has sought public office in the past. In 2022, he ran in the Republican primary election for El Paso County Commissioners Court in Precinct 4. He lost to Blanca Ortiz Trout by 321 votes.

Adams said he also hopes to address major issues that affect students and the district, including bullying and balancing the district’s budget.

“I want our budget to be looked at and our expenditures,” Adams said. “These foolish spending practices without proper resources to look at these vendors, to give us more choices of vendors to give us the best thing out there.”

As of April 6, Adams has raised \$6,175, per his campaign finance

report filed with the district. This includes a \$1,000 donation from the Greater El Paso Association of REALTORS.

Josie Castro Garcia

As a former policy advisor and counselor, Castro Garcia said she hopes to use her skills to help craft regulations and procedures to address some of the issues that affect the district.



Josie Castro Garcia

Castro Garcia, 40, worked for El Paso County for more than eight years, most recently taking on the role of senior policy advisor for Commissioner Carlos Leon. In June, the mother of two moved to the private sector, taking on a job in corporate operations at AT&T.

She is endorsed by both EPISD teachers unions: the El Paso Teachers Association and the El Paso American Federation of Teachers.

“My philosophy is about getting us back to EPISD being the district of choice, so I really want to fix the policies that are broken,” Castro Garcia said in an interview.

Castro Garcia added that she believes the district needs to hold administrators accountable through leadership assessments, enhance its special education program and improve communication with parents.

“I know there’s this failure in communication between the school and the parents because I have teenagers,” Castro Garcia said. “So they’re able to call me and they’re like, ‘Oh, we’re on lockdown, do you know what’s going on?’ When the lockdown was lifted then I got a text from EPISD. That’s horrible because you’re losing a lot of trust in your parents.”

Throughout her campaign, Castro Garcia has put an emphasis on addressing student mental health and school safety.

“I really want to focus on safety. Teachers need to feel safe and

students need to feel safe and parents need to feel safe dropping off their kids,” she said.

Castro Garcia said she is running for the board because she wanted to return to public service. With two kids attending the district and a husband that works as a teacher, Castro Garcia said she already had a vested interest in EPISD. Once the previous trustee stepped down, the choice of what to do next became obvious and she threw her hat in the ring.

Castro Garcia had raised \$2,440 in political contributions, according to her campaign finance report filed with the district.

Jacqueline Martinez

As a teacher in the Canutillo Independent School District, Martinez said she knows firsthand how a school board decision can impact students. Now she said she’s running for a seat in hopes of offering a teacher’s perspective.

“As someone who has that boots-on-the-ground experience within the system, I want to be that voice at the decision-making table,” Martinez said during an interview. “As far as I’m concerned, I feel that it’s problematic that we have these people in positions of power, this body of governance, that pretty much dictates what goes on in the schools, and there’s no teacher perspective when making these decisions on how that policy actually plays out in the classroom.”



Jacqueline Martinez

Martinez, 40, was born and raised in El Paso and has been a teacher for 13 years. She said she is running a grassroots campaign, and has raised more than \$3,900, according to campaign finance reports.

Martinez said her insight would help the district make improvements to tackle the teacher shortage, beyond increasing their pay.

“It goes beyond just a pay raise,” she said. “There are a lot of other

reasons as to why teachers decide to leave the profession. It also has a lot to do with teachers not having the autonomy to just teach, you know, a lot of micromanagement going on.”

The teacher said she hopes to help the district reevaluate how it looks at standardized testing.

“I know that the test is federally mandated, however, I think that throughout the school year we are over testing children,” Martinez said. “We are stealing the ability for them to love learning because really all the classroom has become is drill and kill testing prep, so I want to deemphasize the STAAR test.”

Martinez said she also hopes to cultivate an inclusive environment for LGBTQ students.

“As a teacher, I will always provide a safe space for students, and I feel like there’s many teachers out there that feel the same way,” Martinez said. “I know that right now, there’s a lot of legislation that’s been introduced and is being discussed about targeting those types of students, but I for one will always have my arms open.”

Valerie Beals

Beals said that as a mother of four, she personally saw how the pandemic affected children.

“I saw that they were getting distracted and how far behind kids were,” Beals said during an interview. “And I felt that there were a lot of people at that time that had a lot of opinions and a lot of demands but their voices weren’t being heard. With me being a mother to an autistic son, I needed to advocate more and step up to the plate. And so here I am now.”



Valerie Beals

Beals, 34, grew up in Heber, Arizona. She moved to El Paso with her family in 2018, and made the Sun City her home. Beals said she is a stay-at-home mom and small business owner.

Though Beals did not want to disclose the nature of her family's business, public records filed with the Texas Secretary of State show her as the owner of Beals Family Management Plan and her husband, Shawn Beals, as the owner of Agave Dental Care East and Beals Family Dentistry.

Beals is a member of the Facebook group, "Let School Bells Ring," which was formed in August 2020 in response to school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic. The group made efforts to reopen schools during the height of the pandemic and spoke out against mask and quarantine requirements. Another member of the group, Leslie Hoard, previously ran for the District 3 seat in 2021.

Her campaign finance report shows she has not received any political contributions. However, the political action committee Kids First of El Paso — funded largely by contributions by El Paso business leaders Woody Hunt and Richard Castro — said in a filing that Beals is among four school board candidates it is supporting in this election cycle.

The [Kids First filing](#) says it also is supporting Will Veliz in EPISD and David Morales and Eduardo "Eddie" Mena in Socorro ISD. The PAC has spent \$12,700 with VMP Political Strategies, a firm owned by former El Paso County Commissioner Vince Perez, to support candidates it favors, according to the report.

In a questionnaire sent to candidates by El Paso Matters, Beals said schools should monitor and limit controversial content in their curriculum and books.

"I don't think that my children should be reading or looking at books that teach about sexuality or questioning your sexuality," Beals said in an interview. "When it comes to our teachers in the district and librarians, I feel that they should let the parents teach some of those things and just focus on how to get them off to college."

Beals said one of her top priorities as a board member would be safety, a topic that was fresh on her mind the day after a shooter killed six people, including three children, at a Christian school in Nashville, Tennessee, on March 27.

"It just makes me sick to my stomach to think that these parents send their kids off to school for an education and yet, we are dealing with a lot of these school shootings," she said. "So, are we doing all we can to, you know, take every step to make sure that our kids and our schools and our staff are safe when they're getting to school?"

Correction: An earlier version of this story included an incorrect claim by Valerie Beals of an endorsement by a nonprofit organization. The support is from a political action committee.

Disclosure: Richard Castro and the Woody and Gayle Hunt Family Foundation have been financial supporters of El Paso Matters. Financial supporters play no role in El Paso Matters' journalism.

