

LASA LIBERATOR

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Trump Traps D.C.

AVERY HERSH | staff writer

As the beginning of his second term waxed into the summer of 2025, President Donald Trump took federal control of Washington, D.C.'s police force. Arguing that the crime rate has been rising, President Trump pronounced the state of D.C. a public safety emergency endangering government officials and inhibiting their capacity to do their work.

Officials and residents in D.C. have responded negatively to Trump's act, according to PBS. Multiple lawsuits have challenged its legality, and many opponents argue that his statistics were outdated and misleading. They have pointed out that the crime rate has been falling overall since 1990, with D.C.'s Metropolitan Police reporting that crime fell by 15% in 2024 and 10% in 2025.

Since Trump's takeover of D.C., crime has dropped, though detractors do not attribute the shift to the takeover. Michael Holscher, a resident of the city, discussed how locals felt betrayed by the crackdown.

"It feels unnecessary," Holscher said. "It risks damaging trust in the city while not really solving the deeper issues."

Trump's D.C. control turned to deportation of non-citizens, with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) reporting the

arrest of 189 illegal immigrants and notices of inspection for 187 businesses in May. This was in the interest of lowering crime rates, according to executive order 14333 "Declaring a Crime Emergency in the District of Columbia" from August; however, it left many like Holscher questioning the takeover.

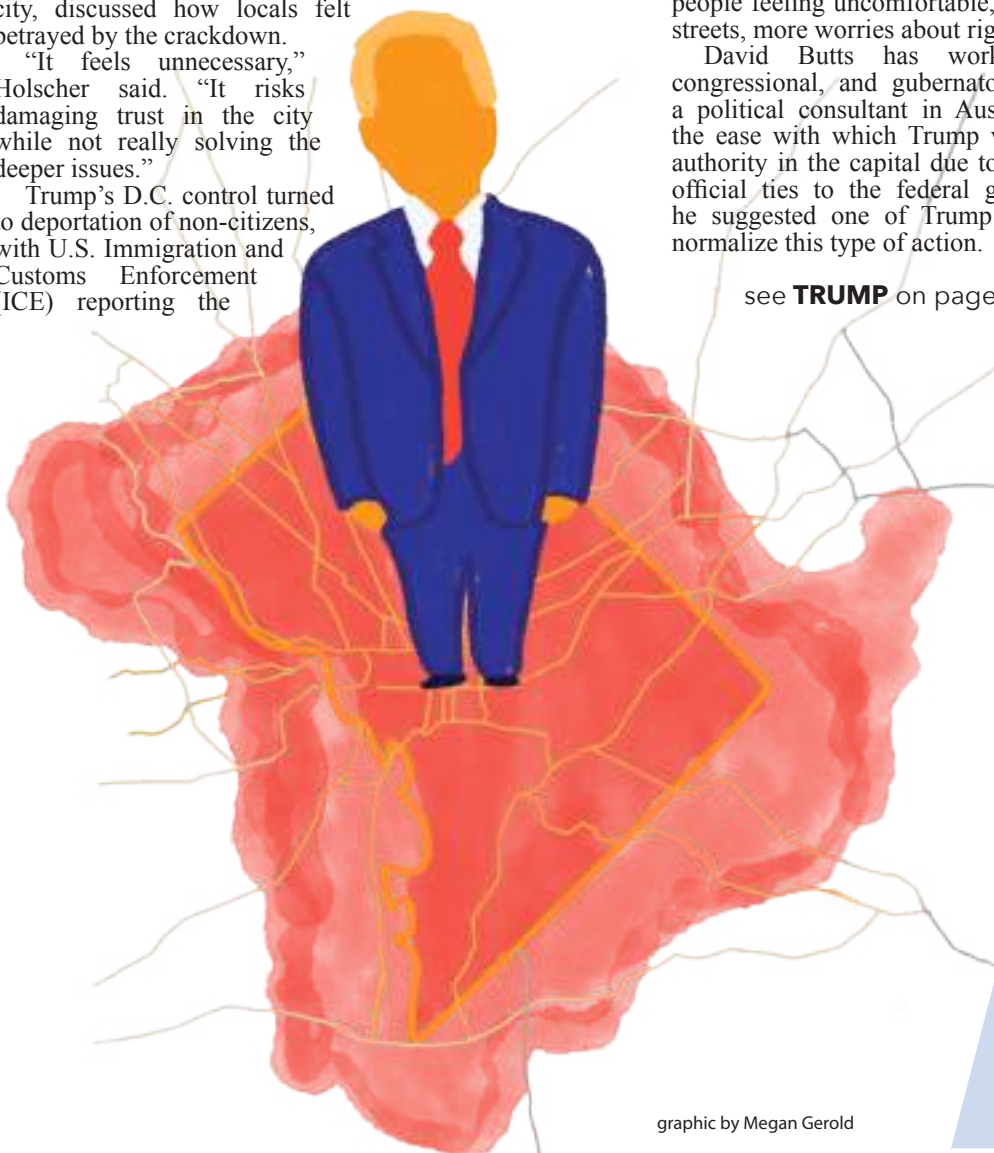
"A few weeks ago, I was leaving my home and saw three masked agents forcibly detaining a food delivery worker without questioning and taking him away in an unmarked vehicle," Holscher said. "My neighbors were asking the masked agents to identify themselves and the authority they had to take these actions, with no response. I'm not sure that's the kind of country most citizens want to live in."

Holscher noted that the takeover impacted his everyday life in the city, commenting that it changed the city's mood as thousands protested the takeover. He believes that, while there was a drop in violent crime, it won't last long beyond the occupation.

"There were some reports of crime dipping right after," Holscher said. "But the trade-off was a lot of people feeling uncomfortable, more tension on the streets, more worries about rights and freedoms."

David Butts has worked on mayoral, congressional, and gubernatorial campaigns as a political consultant in Austin. He attributed the ease with which Trump was able to exert authority in the capital due to its physical and official ties to the federal government, and he suggested one of Trump's aims was to normalize this type of action.

see **TRUMP** on page 6



graphic by Megan Gerold

what's news



see **SAUCE** page 13

photo by Lily Antony



see **MURAL** on lasaliberator.com

photo by Megan Gerold



see **DAY** page 12

photo by Lily Antony

AISD Students Chomp Down

CLEMENTINE DAVIS | staff writer

As the clock hits 11:40 a.m., the halls quickly fill with students rushing to get to the front of the lunch line. Reasons for these students buying lunch range from not having the resources to eat anything else, wanting to save time, and sometimes just because they love the food being served. But one thing many of these students have in common is that they're clueless about the food's origin.

Diane Grodek has worked as the head chef of Austin ISD for five years, and she explained that she has witnessed numerous changes since the beginning of her career as a cafeteria manager. Roughly three-quarters of Austin depends on her and her team to keep their children healthy and happy during the day.

"There are 74 of our 115 schools where the kids eat breakfast and lunch for free because they automatically qualify," Grodek said. "It's important for us to provide it because families need to reserve that money to pay for other necessities. They need to pay their rent, make sure that they can cover their mortgage, and not have to think about the food."

From chicken nuggets to fiesta salads, the LASA school lunches include many different options. LASA senior James Graham has been buying school lunches since his freshman year, and has a clear favorite.

"I really like the carne asada from the burrito bowl line that they just added," Graham said. "I get it with guac and chipotle ranch, it's pretty good."

Many students rely on school lunches as a backup plan. TK Sherman, a freshman who has been eating school lunches since

middle school, uses the option as a safety net for when homework and sleep get in the way of packing her lunch.

"A lot of the time I'm the one making my lunch, and if I forget to do it at night, and I'm running late in the morning, then I'll just grab lunch at school," Sherman said. "That's a lifesaver, especially because I get mean when I don't have enough food."

The AISD Central Warehouse, where Grodek works, is full of industrial-size boxes of every ingredient students see at lunch, and much of it is bought using the money made throughout the year from selling meals. Grodek stated that she wants people to know that more students buying lunches means more money to make even better food.

see **AISD** page 11



graphic by Megan Gerold

WATERLOO GROOVES DOWN THE STREET

JONAH TRIMBLE | staff writer

Austin is the self-proclaimed live music capital of the world, and it supports a large and varied music scene with over 40 record stores, according to a 2023 report by the Texas Music Industry Directory. Waterloo Records, one of the most recognized independent Austin vinyl stores, has been a part of the local community for 43 years, and it recently relocated right down the street to a new, larger location.

Louis Karp originally opened Waterloo Records on South Lamar in 1982. John Kunz, the co-owner of Waterloo Records since the same year of its opening, has operated the store on the corner of West Sixth and North Lamar for 35 years, and he

became sole owner in 1987. In 2019, the building was acquired by Endeavor Real Estate Group, and the store was forced to move. To keep the historical store open, Kunz found a new location and handed ownership to Caren Kelleher, owner of Gold Rush Vinyl, and Trey Watson, CEO of Armadillo Records. While Kunz is no longer the sole owner, he continues to be involved. Waterloo's new location is 1105 North Lamar, and the new setting brings more than just a different address.

According to Waterloo employee Patrick Floyd, the new store is still a work in progress. He explained that the new location means the store is changing and undergoing development.

see **WATERLOO** page 14



graphic by Megan Gerold

photos by Lily Antony

editorial HB-1481 Inconveniences Exceed Effectiveness

Staff Stance: Every grading period the LASA Liberator staff present their opinion on an important current issue in the form of an editorial written by Commentary. The opinions in the piece below represent those of the staff as a collective, not of each individual member.

TINGYU CAO
ARIANA RODRIGUEZ | commentary editors

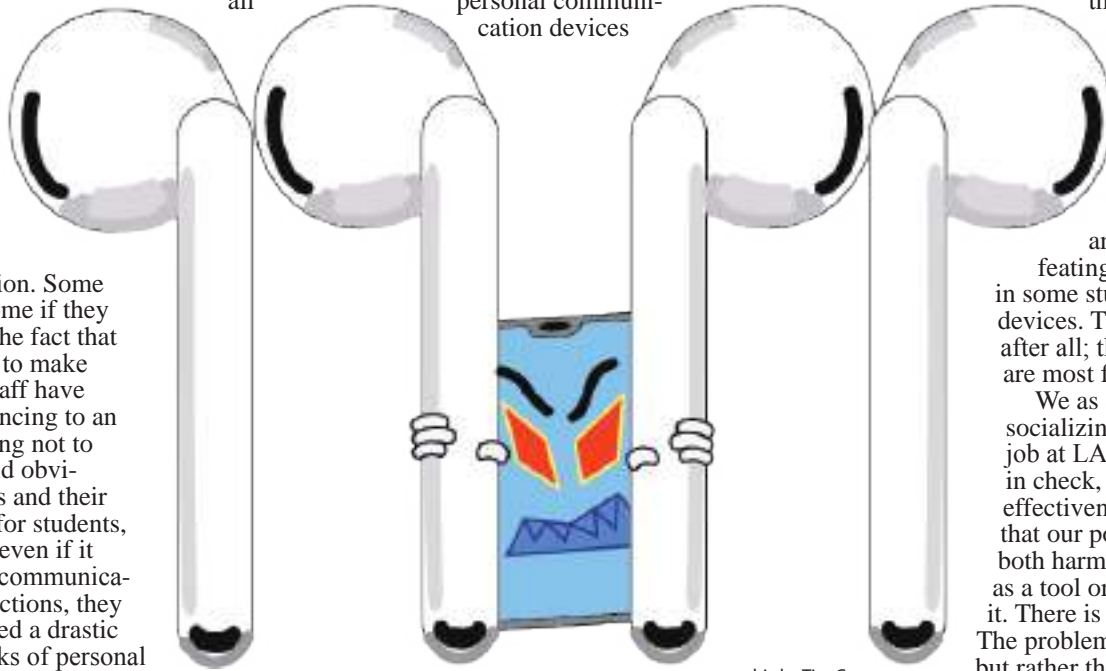
Over the summer, the 89th Texas Legislature session transformed the Texas education system with a series of reforms that range from the disciplinary rules of House Bill 6 to the authorization to display the Ten Commandments of Senate Bill 10. However, the bill that has won the most attention from students is House Bill 1481, which banned the use of personal communication devices inside the school environment.

HB-1481, signed into law by Governor Abbott on June 20, requires school districts to implement policies prohibiting students from using personal communication devices during the school day. In compliance, Austin Independent School District has implemented a policy that utilizes a system of four offenses, which involves confiscating devices, holding them for 48 hours, and conferencing with parents. While many believe HB-1481 is working exactly as intended, there are simply too many drawbacks.

The first major issue is the prohibition of communication with their parents. Not only are students afraid of being unable to contact their parents during possible major emergencies like school shootings, for which Texas is ranked second in the U.S., according to World Population Review, but students have also pointed out the inconveniences of losing communication. Some explained that they are not able to readily call home if they are feeling ill or if practice is canceled. Despite the fact that students can go to either the office or counselors to make phone calls, surveys from the LASA Liberator staff have shown that they might feel uncomfortable announcing to an adult the need to call. This results in them deciding not to call at all. Banning communication devices would obviously affect the communication between students and their parents. HB-1481 creates a huge inconvenience for students, as they would have to ask an adult to call home, even if it was just for something small. The problem with communication devices is that while they can serve as distractions, they can also serve as useful tools. HB-1481 introduced a drastic change, removing both the benefits and drawbacks of personal communication devices.

Another issue is the enforceability of the law. HB-1481 does not specify any specific ways to enforce the policy; the bill hands that problem to the district, and the district assigns the role to the administrators, meaning that certain schools might handle the policy differently from others. While the majority of the Liberator staff believe that the bill has been effective at reducing the usage of personal communication devices, they have also noticed that there are still people using their phones in secrecy. Cellphones aren't as severe a problem at LASA compared to other schools, largely because LASA already implemented a strict cellphone policy last year. Compared to the new devices policy, the policy from last year was much easier to enforce. Under last year's policy, cellphones only had to be kept away during class. The new policy all

not only prohibits the use of personal communication devices



graphic by Tim Cao

but also applies throughout the entire school day. The range over which HB-1481 covers makes enforcement much more difficult.

Evolving from the question regarding the enforcement of HB-1481 is the matter of convenience again. LASA has already had a cellphone policy during 2024-2025, which students may have gotten used to, but now there is this new policy. Students described that they are unable to take pictures, record videos, create contacts for after-school projects, and are experiencing an overall decrease in work efficiency. HB-1481 has done its job in reducing the use of communication devices during the school day, but at the same time, it has created many more problems for the students.

On top of losing the conveniences of personal technology, students are now forced to use district-issued Chromebooks. There is an argument that if everyone uses Chromebooks, then there is an even playing field where family income does not affect the learning quality of their children. This argument only works if Chromebooks were truly conducive to students' learning over personal laptops. Many students are unfamiliar with the district Chromebooks and find them clunky and slow to operate. However, this argument also falls short, as the Chromebook policy creates new inequalities, such as some students receiving older, slower devices, and many struggling with unfamiliar technology, defeating the idea of an equal learning experience. This results in some students being faced with both unfamiliar and worse devices. The perceived equality of HB-1481 isn't very equal after all; therefore, students should just stick to the system they are most familiar with.

We as a school community have seen more focus and more socializing, as well as less cheating. HB-1481 has done a good job at LASA in keeping personal communication devices more in check, yet it is still the popular opinion that, despite the bill's effectiveness at keeping devices away, there are other factors that our policy does not accommodate. Personal technology is both harmful and useful to learning. Whether technology serves as a tool or a distraction is solely dependent on the student using it. There is a better solution than simply eliminating the issue. The problem with HB-1481 does not lie within its effectiveness, but rather the inconvenience it brings.

Raptor Chatter

How do you feel about House Bill 1481?



photo by Tita Gonzalez

Colin Menzer Freshman

"It makes sense to ban phones during class because they can serve as a disruption, but I feel like banning them during the whole day, especially during lunch and passing period, makes no sense because you're not doing work then."



photo by Tita Gonzalez

Danielle D'Cruz Sophomore

"There were already rules saying no phones, people are gonna continue to [use phones] whether or not it's banned. Now it's just harder, and everyone's being inconvenienced."



photo by Tita Gonzalez

Tomas Moreno Junior

"I think it's dumb... I think we should be able to have our phones out during lunch, at least."

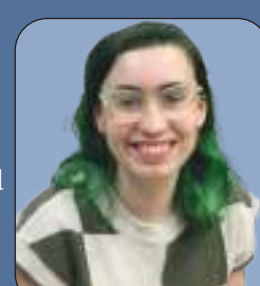


photo by Tita Gonzalez

Annika Fisher-Eddy Senior

"I don't like it ... Over the summer, I [thought] it was gonna be so hard to not use our phones during school, but it actually hasn't been as hard as I thought it would be."

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If you are interested in writing for the paper and becoming a club contributor, be sure to stop by Room 701 for more information!

LASA LIBERATOR

Editorial Policy

Responsibilities of a free student press: Serving as the primary communication link within the Liberal Arts and Science Academy and between the school and the local community, this newspaper accepts the responsibilities inherent in being a free press. The LASA Liberator staff strive to produce a professional-quality publication that follows the Code of Ethics of the Society of Professional Journalists. The objective is to print the news in a fair and objective manner with the utmost regard for integrity.

Editorial Content:

1. The students on The LASA Liberator staff will print articles which have been researched to the best of their ability to obtain the most complete available information.
2. The information will be presented in a truthful and fair manner.
3. When personal commentary is given it will be in good taste on issues that have been researched, analyzed and where expert opinion has been sought.
4. All commentary will be clearly labeled as such.
5. No material which is obscene, libelous or that will cause an immaterial and substantial disruption of the school day, according to accepted legal definitions, will be printed.

The Editorial Boards and its Functions:

The LASA Liberator staff will be governed by an editorial board composed of the following individuals: lead editors and commentary editors.

The Editorial board will:

1. Determine the content of the publication (with input from other staff members)
2. Stress the editorial policy
3. Ensure the accuracy of the publication
4. Address inappropriate behavior on the part of the staff
5. Dispense disciplinary action to staff members
6. Change or add policy as necessary

Viewpoints:

Printed material which contains the opinion of a staff member or a contributing writer will be labeled as such. These views are not intended to reflect the view of the administration of Liberal Arts and Science Academy nor the School Board of the Austin Independent School District. Viewpoints will be given in two areas in the newspaper.

Editorials: These will be determined by the staff consensus. The editorial will be unsigned and will represent the majority viewpoint of the staff.

Commentary: Commentary articles represent the viewpoint of one member of the staff, and are signed as such. These articles do not represent the opinions of the entire staff.

Letters to the Editor: Letters to the Editor are accepted for topics of general interest to the readership of the newspaper. Letters must be submitted typed or neatly printed in ink and must have the signature of the writer and the writer's grade level. Editors reserve the right to determine which issue the letter will be published in, with every effort made to print the letter as soon as possible. The editors also reserve the right to edit the letter for grammar, length and repetition. No letters which are obscene or libelous will be published.

Non-Staff Contributors: Bylined contributions are welcome.

Correction of Errors: The staff makes every effort to print accurate information. In the case of substantial errors, a written correction will be made in the following issue of the newspaper.

Sources: In general, no anonymous sources will be used in reporting. Sources from within the school, as well as those not connected with the school, will be used. Under no circumstances will gifts, including coupons, etc., be accepted by the staff members from sources or advertisers.

Note: The LASA Liberator will attempt to publish a range of opinions within reason.

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LETTER TO THE
EDITOR
2025-2026



Commentary Disclaimer: Commentary is committed to sharing a variety of views through journalistic expression. The articles we publish may put forth ideas and arguments that are not representative of everyone that is a part of the newspaper, or The LASA Liberator as a whole.

Paper vs. Audio vs. Digital Books

ELINA SARKAR | staff writer

Storytelling is one of humanity's oldest traditions. Long before Kindles—or even paper—we verbally told stories of courage, love, and loss. In 2025, that tradition lives on with audiobooks. As a voracious reader, I used to be an audiobook skeptic. However, I have learned that while all forms of literature have a place, all readers, both avid and reluctant, should hit play on an audiobook.

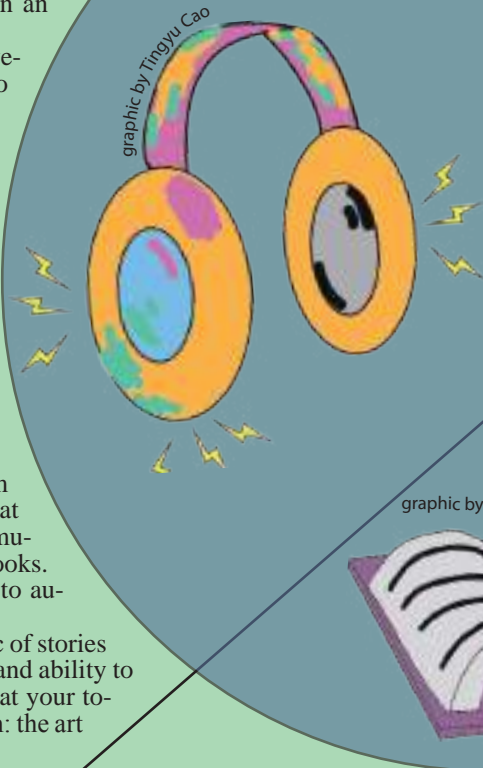
One of the primary reasons is just pure convenience. With audiobooks and earbuds, it is possible to reap all of the benefits of a book while jogging, cooking, or tidying up. Any sort of downtime can quickly turn into reading time.

Audiobooks also support mental well-being. Research from the Journal of Basic and Clinical Neuroscience found that audiobooks have the ability to improve mental health in older adults, and teens experience similar benefits: lower stress and greater focus.

Most importantly, audiobooks can help engage reluctant readers. Hearing someone read a book out loud fosters emotional connection, increases fluency, and teaches readers proper pronunciation. Even though it's a common misconception that listening to an audiobook is cheating, that could not be further from the truth. Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley have shown that listening to audiobooks stimulates the same neural pathways as reading physical books. And, on the plus side, students who enjoyed listening to audiobooks actually enjoyed reading more.

Audiobooks can bring all people into the magic of stories because of their convenience, positive mental impacts, and ability to excite reluctant readers. The next time you look down at your to-be-read list, I invite you to engage in an ancient tradition: the art of verbal storytelling.

AUDIO



COLETTE KLIVANS | staff writer

PAPER

Although audio and digital books have the potential to be the future of society's way of sharing knowledge, reading classic paper books will forever be the most beneficial and loved way of reading, despite it perhaps going out of style in society's electronics-filled future.

There is something timeless about the way paper books connect people. Imagine childhood bedtime stories, where parents and kids bond over the same page, turning pages together. Paper books are also beautiful. Covers and illustrations are works of art that readers can display on shelves in their home; a collection of books can become a reflection of your identity. Of course, paper books aren't just for aesthetics—they are practical. Paper books are easy to take with you when you travel and don't need to be charged.

Multiple studies from Publishing Press, a self-publishing service, have found that people retain information better when they read paper books. The same studies show that 85% of educators say old-fashioned note-taking by hand is the best way to learn. At night, reading paper books, instead of straining to read a glowing screen, is optimal. In addition, paper books are much better than other forms of reading for the environment. They are produced using sustainable resources and are recyclable, usually ending up in thrift stores rather than the dumpster. Discarded e-readers produce toxic waste and take more carbon to produce.

While we may slowly see digital and audiobooks become more prominent in our increasingly technological society, we shouldn't lose sight of the value of paper books. They remind us to slow down, focus, and experience a story that connects us to each other and the world.

KEILA RODRIGUEZ | staff writer

DIGITAL

Some people love reading through print books, and others like reading digitally through their devices, but we all have different opinions on which one is better. I believe reading a digital book is more beneficial than reading a print book because of its accessibility in a variety of different ways.

Digital books give you access to a book anywhere without worrying about returning it or losing it, and they take up minimal space. They can especially help those with disabilities. The Learning Disabilities Resources Foundation found that reading digitally can allow users to adjust font sizes to reduce eye strain and have accommodations like text-to-speech, which can be beneficial for people with poor eyesight, and be more accessible to those who don't have the ability to purchase physical books.

Digital books also have the possibility to have a positive impact on our environment. According to NPR, reading digital books is better for those who read more than 36 books a year. Reading around this number of books would outweigh the environmental impact of the purchase of an e-reader by preserving the forest around us. NPR also reported that the head of Kindle product and marketing, Corey Badcock, stated that 2.3 million metric tons of carbon emissions were saved over a two-year period because of e-readers using Kindle.

While there are merits to print and audiobooks, they also have drawbacks. According to an article from Time Magazine, which showcased expert opinions, audiobooks decrease comprehension and understanding of the materials. People have to rewind the audio continuously while multitasking because they are doing something else instead of being focused on the content, and they don't have the ability to "eye-read". Reading print books requires one to carry them around, resulting in loss, damage, or simply taking up too much space. Print books can be easily damaged when drinking water, or juice, and eating other foods while reading.

Overall, digital reading is accessible for those with disabilities, and it is beneficial to the environment.

Do Grades Show Learning?

JACOB BARRERA | staff writer

When you walk into almost any high school, the weight of grades immediately fills the air. Whispers from students about GPA or grades on Frontline are everywhere, often backed by the belief that their success is shown through numbers, instead of growth. But do those numbers truly reflect what we've learned or just how well we've played the school system?

As a student at LASA, I've noticed that grades are dominant in almost every conversation, and they honestly shouldn't be. In fact, many educators even argue that they actually measure compliance more than competence. Factors such as attendance and late penalties on assignments often get mixed with actual academic performance, and it creates anxious and number-worrying students. It's frustrating to see so many students not able to learn because they are caught up in assignments for almost every class.

Research from Education Week (EdWeek) shows that traditional grades actually combine non-academic factors with achievement and blur what grades mean. Alfie Kohn, a long-time grades critic from EdWeek, argues that grades actually reduce students' interest in learning and handling challenging tasks. This is a sign that LASA should move toward a grading system that rewards curiosity and growth, not strategies created to get points.

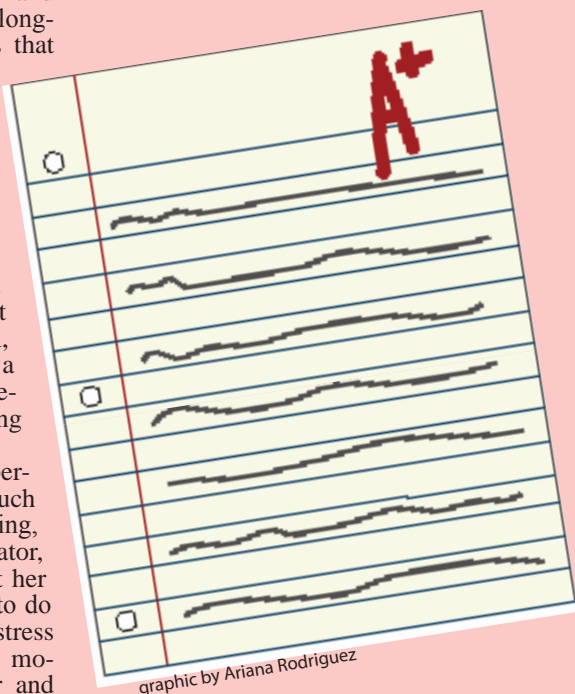
The article "Teaching More by Grading Less" from CBE—Life Sciences Education stated that traditional systems can discourage real engagement; it argues that whenever grades are the ultimate goal, learning becomes secondary. For LASA, a switch to mastery-based grading would prepare students for complex problem-solving that could potentially go past high school.

All over the country, teachers have experimented with different grading systems such as contract grading, specifications grading, and ungrading. Sarah Barringer, an educator, used contract grading. She explained that her students finally understood exactly what to do to achieve good grades, which reduced stress inside the classroom. Students are more motivated because the rules are now clear and

achievable. Similarly, Chemical and Engineering News described how specifications grading gives students better chances to meet clearer standards. In LASA, this would allow students to focus on comprehending material deeply rather than stress about grades.

LASA could pilot mastery-based grading in a few classes. Students would be able to revise their work until it meets the teacher's standards, and teachers would provide feedback instead of using numbers. This method of grading would show progress and growth in students rather than a snapshot of a student's performance. Most teachers who have this switch have reported that there are fewer disputes in the classroom and deeper engagement in conversations, according to CBE.

So, if education is really about growth, then the grading system should reflect it. The traditional grading system doesn't show what we really know; it often shows how well we comply. The time is right for considering alternatives that reward understanding because if grades don't reflect learning, then maybe it's the grades that need to change, not the students.



AI Steals Art, Takes Credit

AALIYAH AHAMED | staff writer

When Elliana Esquivel, an artist who has been creating art since the age of 16, experienced a drop in commissions and online sales, she suspected her art may have been stolen, according to an article from WCNC Charlotte. She later found out, using a website, that her art had been stolen by generative artificial intelligence, a majority of which was created when she was experiencing homelessness.

As technology advances, the use of AI is becoming more common and is used in many different ways, according to the Government Accountability Office. It's not only used for quick visuals, but for images in journals and newspapers. Although some could argue that using AI-generated art is beneficial because it takes less time and is more accessible, it is harmful because it takes away opportunities and creativity from human artists, exploits their work, and diminishes the meaningfulness of art. Plagiarism is a legitimate concern for many artists, as their work is not only used to train algorithms, but is also copied in the art produced by the trained AI.

AI-generated art threatens the jobs of human artists. A survey conducted by the Society of Authors Policy Team showed that 26% of illustrators and 36% of translators have already lost work due to generative AI. According to Leo Li, a gaming industry recruiter in Hangzhou, China, over 70% of video game illustrators lost their jobs in 2021, mainly due to AI. It takes away job

opportunities for artists, illustrators, and even translators, and it undermines the creative aspect of art.

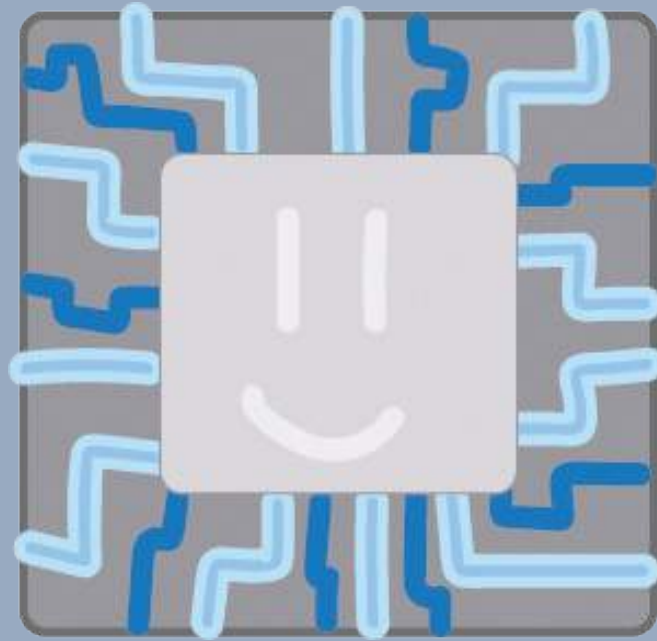
In a study that appeared in the June 2023 edition of Computers in Human Behavior, researchers led a series of psychological experiments involving AI art. Participants were shown two paintings, one made by AI and the other by humans. In reality, both pieces of artwork were created by only AI or humans. The results showed participants preferred artwork they

thought was human-made. The study found that there was a pervasive bias towards work they believed was human-made, believing it was more creative.

Some argue that there are positive aspects to AI art. For example, anyone can make art using AI, and people with little experience creating art or lacking the technical skills that experienced artists generally develop. But since AI art is generated from trained AI using

so many artists' work, it's not actually creating a "new" piece of art, but rather remixing the art of so many human artists. It allows people to access a created work without actually having to go through the creative process. For many artists, the process is more important than the product. Therefore, AI is not democratizing art.

Although the development of AI is inevitable, we must maintain guidelines to protect the work of human artists. By prioritizing creativity and supporting human work, we can enrich the world of art rather than exploiting it.



graphic by Tingyu Cao

Stop Silencing Our Voices

PHOENIX GEROME | staff writer

Under the current administration, American censorship has increased significantly to the point where the federal government is now breaking fundamental human rights. Most censorship applies to books, rap music, and hardcore rock and roll. There are also other contributing factors, such as the targeting of specific groups of people, such as the LGBTQ+ community or different races.

Censorship in the United States first started with the targeting of free speech rights of many individuals, most of whom were college-aged immigrants. Rumeysa Öztürk and Mahmoud Khalil were pro-Palestine activists who were arrested by ICE officials. After their arrest, many have questioned whether or not this act violates free speech for non-citizens. Similar to this, the Trump Administration has released a directive named NSPM-7 that he signed on September 25, 2025. NSPM-7 basically calls for federal agencies to investigate and disrupt any individuals, groups, or networks affiliated with or involved in political violence and/or intimidation. Many people have raised concerns that NSPM-7 could be used to silence dissent and conflate protected speech with political violence. Censorship violates both Article 2 and Article 7 of the Declaration of Human Rights, an international document that outlines the rights and freedoms of all human beings. Article 2 states that everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms that the Declaration has to offer without distinction of any case, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or any other status. Article 7 states that all people are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection. Yet, censor-

ship is still everywhere. For example, a book that was recently banned in many schools, named "The Bluest Eye", talks about the struggles of racism and beauty in a person of color's life. This ban targets an individual of color, which clearly violates the articles. At this point, both the country and state governments have filtered so much media and literacy to suit their own preferences.

Book bans are the most common form of censorship: both PEN America and the American Library Association (ALA) showed a dramatic increase in book bans spanning from 2021 to 2025. In the 2023–2024 school year, PEN America reported 10,000 book bans in public schools in the United States. Compared to the 2022–2023 school year, book bans spiked nearly 300%, most of which regard sexuality and people of color. Approximately 40% of book bans feature characters of color, another 41% of books are banned due to LGBTQ+ themes, and 21–22% banned books feature racism. PEN America states that from July 2023 to June 2024, they recorded 10,046 instances of book bans across 29 states and 220 public school districts. Since July 2021, they have recorded 15,940 instances of book bans across 43 states and 415 public school districts. This shows that censorship in the United States has been significantly increasing over the years, especially in media such as books, which is harming democracy and limiting freedoms.

More examples of censorship include the U.S. Open tennis match in New York on September 7, 2025, in which the president was shown during the national anthem. Because of the match, the U.S. Tennis Association sent an email to broadcasters to filter out any negativity towards Trump. Additionally, the Trump administration is implementing new laws

that require journalists to withhold information until it has been reviewed and approved by the government. This is a clear case of censorship in the United States that is limiting our knowledge and limiting access to the truth, which is harmful for the American people. If journalists fail to do this, they risk losing their credentials that give them access to the Pentagon. In fact, depending on how important the document is, the reporter may even face legal action. This example of censorship highlights the danger of restricting the press in our society. The truth is hidden, and the public is kept in the dark about the knowledge and details that are going on within their own government.

Advocates for press freedoms claim that the new restrictions on the press are an assault on independent journalism.

Although some cases of censorship don't directly violate the First Amendment because they may not be educationally suitable, censorship still limits access to unique and diverse perspectives on an individual's life. As a society, we should have access to the banned books and media not only for knowledge but for the power of democracy. Our society deserves more freedom of the media. We have to put a stop to the ban of American literature and media based on specific groups of people and cultures.



Graphic by Paxton Tridrick



Graphic by Tinoyi Cao

The Case for Lowering the Voting Age to 16

ZOE PERALES | staff writer

As a 14-year-old student at LASA, I'm already thinking about the responsibilities and challenges that come with growing up. My friends and I are starting jobs, managing demanding classes and extracurriculars, and, most importantly, directly experiencing how political decisions shape our education and futures. That's why I believe the voting age in the United States should be lowered to 16. Denying young people a voice in elections is unfair and short-sighted because a democracy that values participation should not exclude those who are ready and willing to take part.

Lowering the voting age is not a new and outlandish idea: Scotland already allowed 16 and 17-year-olds to vote in its 2014 independence referendum, and according to BBC News,

more than 75% of them cast a ballot. Austria also lowered its voting age to 16 in 2007 with the goal of increasing civic engagement early. Part of the rationale behind the decisions was that young people should have a say in matters that will impact the future they will inherit, and there is ample data to show that younger generations' voter turnout reflects their investment in political matters, too. Researchers at the University of Vienna found that younger voters in Austria often participated at higher rates than older, first-time voters, showing that teens can be just as active citizens as adults, if not more. These examples prove that, when given the chance, youth show up, get involved, and demonstrate their desire to be involved in politics.

A main opposition to lowering the voting age is the perception that 16-year-olds aren't mature enough to make serious political choices, but, again, research says the opposite. Temple University psychologist Laurence Steinberg studied how teens make decisions and found that, by age 16,

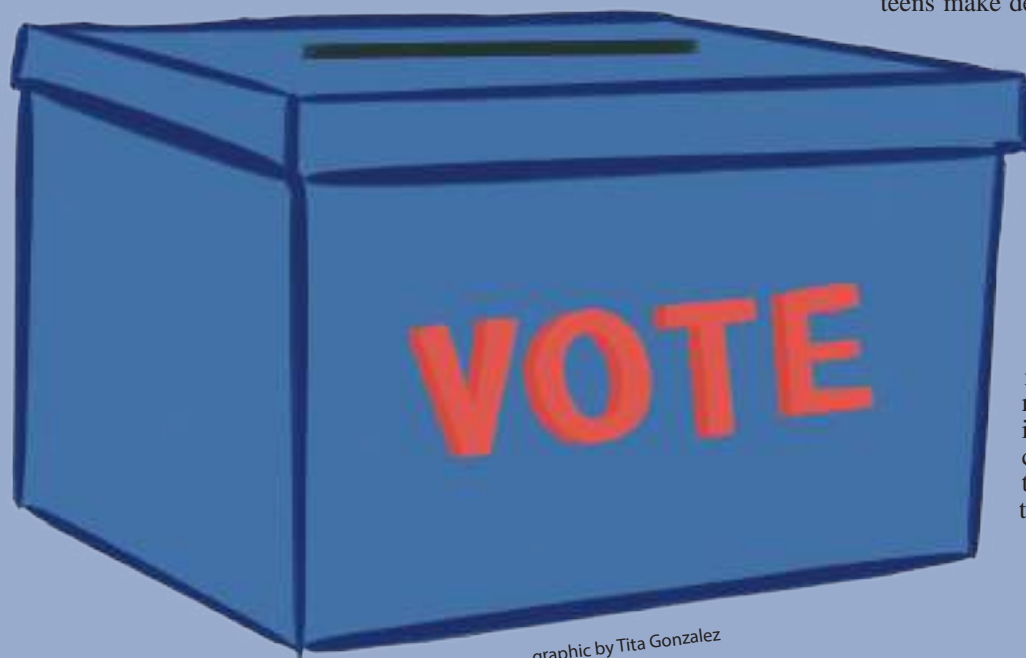
they are just as capable as adults of making calm, reasoned choices, which are the exact qualities needed to vote. Critics who say teens would make impulsive choices forget that many adults don't always research their options carefully, either, or even participate in this civic right. According to a June 2025 Pew Research Center report, only 37% of eligible American citizens (18 and up) voted in all three of the most recent national elections. Meanwhile, many high school students are taking civics, government, and history classes, which means they're actively learning about the system at the same moment they could start

voting.

Young people are already affected by the laws adults make. Politics about climate change, education, and safety in schools directly shape their lives. According to the Pew Research Center, Generation Z is the most diverse and socially aware generation yet, and excluding their voices from democracy only makes it weaker. Many teens have already proven their commitment to issues by organizing nationwide protests, such as the March For Our Lives after the Parkland shooting, or climate strikes led by youth activists. This only strengthens the idea that teens are already participating in politics, even if they don't yet have a ballot.

The U.S. has lowered the voting age before. The 26th Amendment dropped it from 21 to 18 during the Vietnam War because young people were being drafted but couldn't vote. The slogan at the time was "Old enough to fight, old enough to vote," and the amendment passed faster than almost any other in U.S. history. In 2025, teenagers face their own challenges from rising college costs to the climate crisis, and the same logic applies. If they live with the consequences, then they should have a say.

Lowering the voting age is not about handing out a privilege. It is about recognizing that teens are already contributing to society and deserve representation. At LASA and other high schools across the country, students debate politics in class, lead clubs, and organize walkouts. If the U.S. wants a stronger democracy, it should trust its youngest citizens to be a part of it. The sooner lawmakers realize that, the better our democracy will be.



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

Violent Texas Floods Leave Communities Reeling

DAVID PODBIELSKI | staff writer

A single night of heavy rain and rushing water left an impact that the Texas Hill Country will remember for many more. On July 4, 2025, remnants of a tropical cyclone that formed in the southwestern Gulf of Mexico battered Central Texas, overwhelming Kerr County, a flood-prone area where the storm caused a record-breaking rise of water that destroyed hundreds of homes.

The Guadalupe River rose between 16 and 37 feet in some areas, according to U.S. Geological Survey water gauge data. PBS reported that 135 people died, leading Texas residents and organizations to undertake widespread efforts to restore the towns and communities affected. Lee Pool, the Volunteer Fire Department Chief in Hunt, Texas, explained that the floods came extremely fast. Because of their timing, people in towns along the Guadalupe River were trapped by rising water before they could react.

"I got called out at 3:37 in the morning to assist a family of five that was trapped on a roof," Pool said. "I was calling my wife and assuring her that I'm going to be okay."

Within the following day, the waters receded, allowing rescue services to enter. The next morning, he began his work.

"Initially, when the water went down, the closest residents were on the river closest to us that we had access to," Pool said. "That's when we started our search and recovery efforts. We did find victims, we removed those bodies from the areas, so that way, justices of the peace and the coroners could come through and pick them up. But later, when the waters did go down, we had to establish an incident command system at our fire station."

Immediately after the flood, first responders were blocked by the obstruction of key routes into towns. Roads had been washed away by currents, and wood and debris blocked the limited number of

entrances into the small towns that were hit.

"Shoemaker Crossing, that's really the only way into Hunt," Pool said. "And so we had to wait for the water to go down for that and then remove the debris from that bridge, make sure that it was structurally sound, and still had integrity because we were going to be driving heavy equipment across it."

Because access to so many areas was blocked, Pool's emergency coordination included heavy machinery. After they had cleared the roads, they were able to send in smaller units, although by then the object of their efforts had shifted.

"Excavators, skid steers, those pieces of equipment were used to move debris," Pool said. "So that way, cadaver dogs, cadaver sniffing horses, could come and do their job."

Along with search and rescue, volunteers helped clear debris and look for victims, one of whom was Jacob Mattern. Originally from Boerne, a town southeast of Kerrville that escaped the scope of the floods, Mattern had visited Kerr County in his childhood, and he felt the disaster hit close to home.

"I don't think a lot of people really knew what all was going on or how serious it was initially," Mattern said. "It'd been multiple days since the flood had gone through there. And there were just still so many people that they said were still missing."

Although the Texas Hill Country is familiar with flooding, this magnitude of flooding was unexpected, and there were few flood-warning systems to abate its suddenness. Pool recalled markers like the Dam Store area in Ingram being completely submerged for the first time.

"I've heard stories about the other 1979 flood and how it got up into that area, and it's unfathomable," Pool said. "Like, 'I'll never see that'. We saw it on July the 4th of 2025, and it was even bigger than that."

After the strength of the Guadalupe River took many by surprise, search and rescue efforts after the initial emergency response grew grim. When the storm woke locals, it was often because waters had risen to such an extent that they surrounded them, leaving little opportunity for escape.

"It had been a recovery operation, from my understanding, since that Monday," Mattern said. "I don't think that they even found anyone alive after Saturday. They were sending people out to go see if any more bodies could be recovered."

The sudden damage and loss of life shocked communities. The Guadalupe River's calmness often attracted swimmers from nearby areas, including those in summer camps at the time of the flood, making the chaos more heartbreaking, according to Mattern.

"I mean, it was crazy," Mattern said. "When we got down closer to the river, you'd look up and there would be these objects way high up in these cypress trees. And it's hard to describe how surreal it was there in the aftermath of it and the feeling of the sheer height of water that washed over the river. It was really sad."

According to Justine Shih, an employee at the Austin Disaster Relief Network (ADRN), long-

term recovery efforts are continuing to help the area rebuild. Her organization has coordinated restoration and cleanup efforts in the area.

"We've been able to deploy thousands of volunteers to help with cleanup efforts and physical relief, which is still active," Shih said. "We've been assembling hygiene kits and cleanup buckets, which allow families to have basic essentials and regain their dignity after a disaster."

Organizations like ADRN provide help to those affected from the big things to the small. With the homes and communities of many having been destroyed, Shih pointed out that sometimes it's the small things that can give people the most support.

"It tells them that someone is there, someone cares for them," Shih said. "All these are helping to build a foundation for long-term recovery, which is like helping with home repairs, helping with emotional and spiritual care as they recover in that way from the disaster and just continue to walk with them as they rebuild their lives."

Although the tragedy of young lives cut short at first jarred Central Texans, Pool observed that it ended up uniting them, with people like Mattern coming to help out their community in a time of need. To help with flood recovery from a distance, people can donate to organizations like ADRN and Community for the Hill Country.

"Our community stepped up and showed compassion, and everyone wanted to pitch in and help those that were in need," Pool said. "We heard stories about people who didn't have homes that were affected, that were taking entire families into their homes and allowing them to shower and sleep and fellowship with each other. Out of complete darkness, there was light shining."



BUILDING BACK Volunteer Fire Department Chief Lee Pool poses with members of his department. Local officials were instrumental in initial emergency response efforts, as well as later recovery. photo courtesy of Lee Pool

"We heard stories about people who didn't have homes that were affected, that were taking entire families into their homes and allowing them to shower and sleep and fellowship with each other. Out of complete darkness, there was light shining."

- LEE POOL, VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT CHIEF IN HUNT, TEXAS

Redistricting Rewrites Texas into Fragments

ANDREW DRUMMOND | staff writer
VICTOR MARTINEZ | editor-in-chief

Signed into law on Aug. 29, Texas House Bill 4 is expected to turn five Democratic seats to Republicans, bumping the GOP incumbent majority from 65% to 79% of Texas seats, according to the Texas Tribune. With voter registration data indicating that Republicans make up around half of Texas' voters, critics argue it is a clear case of the Republican party gerrymandering the state of Texas before the 2026 midterm elections.

Gerrymandering allows state governments to turn a population minority into a representative majority through strategic district drawings. This involves the suppression of minority votes by splitting their population up through a process called cracking. Conversely, minority votes favoring the opposing party may also be suppressed through packing, when a minority is overloaded into one district to take away competition from neighboring ones.

Federal law mandates that the districts, which are drawn by state legislatures, are rebalanced every ten years in accordance with the U.S. census so that districts retain similar populations to ensure equal federal representation. However, congressional districts may also be redrawn mid-decade, usually due to gerrymandering.

Mary Ibarra is a political coordinator at the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) Texas chapter. Gerrymandering is a central concern of the ACLU, which seeks to preserve the rights and political autonomy of American citizens and pushes for nonpartisan redistricting.

"Having partisan motivations isn't illegal," Ibarra said. "It's not something that

we condone... They've resulted in maps that don't have equal representation for voters of color. Our biggest takeaway is, no matter how you cut it, it's really harmed a lot of communities that we try to represent and advocate for."

Hispanic and Black votes are likely to go for Democrats, meaning that when their influence is limited in districts, it increases the number of seats Republicans can win. Chris Perkins, a Republican pollster whose work informed the drawing of the congressional maps in Texas' 2003 redistricting, defended the packing of minorities into majority-minority districts.

"There are more minority opportunity districts than there were on the previous map," Perkins said. "There are more majority minority districts on this map than there were in the previous."

Some Republican personalities have defended gerrymandering by pointing out that Democrats engage in gerrymandering, too. Perkins in particular argued that Democrats are guilty of the ongoing national trend towards districts weighted to create partisan advantages.

"Republicans in Congress are mirroring exactly what Democrats have done, especially in the state of New York... Massachusetts, and Maryland," Perkins said. "Democrats don't like when Republicans are in charge and will intentionally draw Democratic districts, but when Republicans do it, that's wrong."

Through a two-week exodus to blue states such as Illinois and New York, Texas House Democrats broke the quorum during the first special session called to vote on HB-4 and brought national attention to HB-4, halting deliberations by denying the attendance required to pass the bill. Though the session was adjourned, the Texas legislature issued arrest warrants to return the Democrats to Texas for the necessary two-thirds attendance ratio, culminating in HB-4 being passed and backlash from Republicans like Perkins.

"That's their right," Perkins said. "There is a quorum breaking process, and if they decide they want to halt the process, okay—it is what it is. Ultimately, they can't stay away forever. They've gotta come back and vote on what they think is best for their constituents."

Shortly before the return of Texas' Democratic legislators, the California State Legislature proposed Proposition 50, a ballot measure that would change five of California's congressional seats to Democratic majorities meant to counterbalance Texas' redistricting. Since California law prevents a majority in their House from approving their own gerrymandering, the bill would be put to a statewide vote in a November special election rather than a vote by the state legislature.

Jennifer Lyons-Hunt teaches U.S. History at Austin Community College and is an active member of the Democratic Party. She is one of the activists calling into question the legality of Texas' latest gerrymandering attempt for several reasons, one of which is the

president's involvement, as he commented in an interview with CNBC that the Republican Party was entitled to these seats.

"This is the party kowtowing to the president because he said he wanted these seats," Lyons-Hunt said. "It's unconstitutional. I think it's a gross overreach of the executive branch. He has merged the two. The legislative branch are his henchmen, they're not there to keep him in check, which is what they're supposed to do."

Groups like the NAACP, League of United Latin American Citizens, and the Fair Maps Texas Action Committee are also challenging the legality of HB-4 in court. Should HB-4 withstand review, it will change legal precedent for redistricting. Lyons-Hunt believes it will snowball into further aggressive gerrymandering on both sides of the aisle.

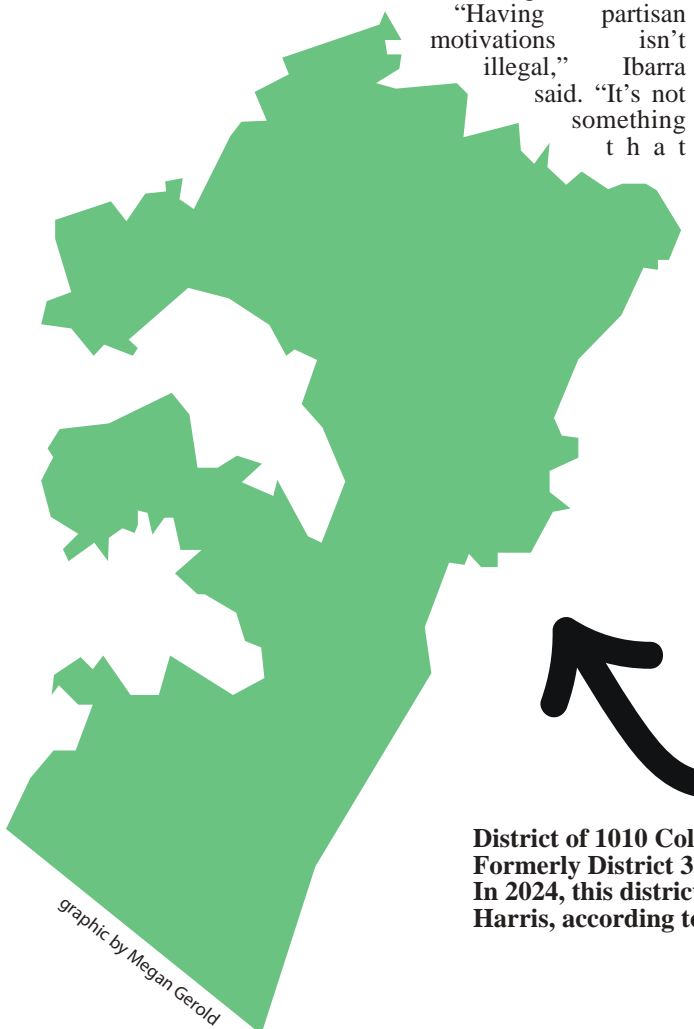
"You can essentially steal seats," Lyons-Hunt said. "Then anybody can do it. Republicans are shortsighted on that; that means in a blue state, the Democrats could do it and gain more seats for them."

One motivation for Texas Republicans to redistrict is the coming 2026 congressional elections. Although Donald Trump was elected with a popular majority in 2024, his popularity has dipped since, with The Economist reporting a 39% approval rating, suggesting the establishment of a Democratic majority after the 2026 midterm elections.

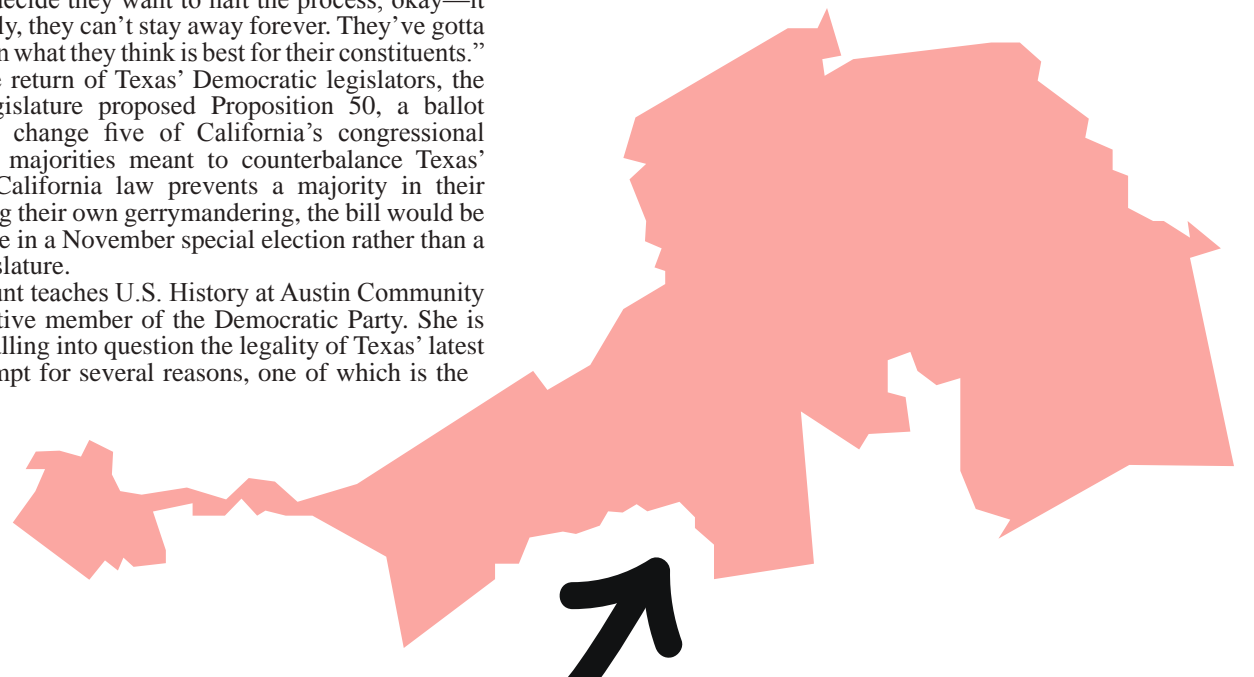
"We're very much in a gray zone," Ibarra said. "Is partisan redistricting going to happen after every big election as opposed to how it has typically been done in the past?"

The legal precedent of this bill has varying outcomes to political processes for redistricting and political rights. While this could determine outcomes of elections, Lyons-Hunt believes this does not negate the importance of votes and civic participation.

"You turn 18, and it is absolutely your job to vote," Lyons-Hunt said. "Any state is up for grabs if people just show up."



District of 1010 Colorado St, Austin, TX 78701
Formerly District 37
In 2024, this district voted 24.2% for Trump and 73.2% for Harris, according to The Texas Tribune



District of 1010 Colorado St, Austin, TX 78701
Now District 10
Under the changed map, this new district would have voted 60.5% for Trump and 37.9% for Harris, according to The Texas Tribune

graphic by Megan Gerold

Biology Approaches New Horizons

VIOLET ZITKOVIC | staff writer

The ability to go to a clinic and figure out, within hours, what a human embryo would grow into used to be science fiction. Now, science has made it possible for someone to know a myriad of the embryo's traits: gender, height, hair color, and even the risk of future disease. Soon, they may even be able to pick these features themselves.

Embryonic gene sequencing is the process of transcribing the entire genetic code of a child before it's born in order to predict how it will grow up. The technology can predict physical characteristics such as hair color to vulnerability for cancers and birth defects. Gene editing technology has potential to pave the way for changing DNA sequences. LASA Biotechnology teacher Victoria Parra instructs students about how to conduct genetic analysis and its ethical implications.

"Sequencing itself is just being able to read the actual DNA code that's within an organism... we break it down and run it through a machine and that machine is able to tell us that sequence of nucleotides that correlate to a specific gene," Parra said. "So as we go through and we read the genetic sequence itself, the DNA code, we can identify certain genes or certain aspects of that DNA code and what they more or less code for."

While some silicon-valley startups are researching gene sequencing and editing in these embryos, according to Science, much of the research is also coming from academic spaces, according to Parra. Being able to interpret these genes requires a higher level of knowledge and equipment, according to Science.

"So that's really done at the university levels and higher," Parra said. "But that's absolutely it. If we know the genetic sequence that encodes for a protein, you can just look at the sequence and see if that protein is being made or not."

Dr. Jon Partridge is a biochemistry professor at UT Austin. Through his own research and collaboration with fellow genome scientists, he has an abundance of experience with interpreting genetic codes and the entire string of genetic material within an organism.

"Over the last few decades, we've built giant depositories of information about genomes," Partridge said. "Usually one of the first things that's done with an organism is they create a reference genome that is the best representative of what you expect that organism to be."

Partridge explained that these reference genomes, also classified as wild-type genomes due to being commonly found in natural populations, demand data from several different sources to create. They take information from many different organisms, differ between males and females, and require existing knowledge to interpret after being sequenced. After this process, scientists are quite easily able to analyze genomes of specific organisms.

"In terms of how we process it, we have access to a lot of databases," Partridge said. "We have access to a lot of different types of software that is designed exclusively to help us take a sample, a product of a sequencing reaction, and then compare it to something else."

According to the National Institutes of Health, the field of genetic editing has been revolutionized in recent years thanks to the discovery of CRISPR, an enzyme naturally found in bacteria to fight viruses, which can be easily adapted in the lab to implement on human genomes. Vanya Nagy studies molecular biology and genetics at the Austrian Academy of Sciences, and she explained how CRISPR has revolutionized her field of study.

"It's like genetic scissors," Nagy said. "We've isolated these enzymes and we trained them to cut and modify DNA where we tell them."

According to Nagy, it allowed biotechnicians to genetically modify any organism they wanted. It's also less expensive than other, older techniques.

"It's so easy to do," Nagy said. "You yourself can build a little lab in your garage today, and you can genetically modify organisms within two months."

However, this ease of use might come at a cost, since humans don't know enough yet to fully understand the future repercussions that this technology can have. Making mosquitoes genetically sterile, for example, is a proposed use of the technology to control a pest population, but its novelty means later effects of such a decision aren't yet known.

"What you're really doing is you're changing evolution," Nagy said. "You release these mosquitoes into the wild, they pass on this sterile mutation to the other mosquitoes, and you have the entire population of mosquitoes dead. And this is great... but what's going to happen to the population of bats, because they feed on mosquitoes? What's going to happen to the rest of the ecosystem? We certainly don't understand the repercussions of destroying a species."

According to Nagy, editing human DNA poses a host of further implications. Because of its inherent complexity, it's usually not as direct as simply removing a piece of DNA to cure a disease.

"Between the two of us, right now, there are 500 different potentially disease-causing mutations that we have," Nagy said. "You have your 500 and I have my 500, so if we're trying to

figure out why I have a certain trait and you don't, or why I got a certain disease and you didn't, there would be 500 different equally likely possibilities. Which one of these do we edit?"

Most diseases are not monogenic, and are instead the result of mutations in multiple genes. Through epigenetics, they can also be influenced by the environment, stifling or promoting the production of certain proteins.

"You want to sequence the embryo to make sure that it doesn't have any massive chromosomal abnormalities and that it doesn't have any mutations that would cause a severe genetic disorder," Nagy said. "But being able to read the sequence and then have the potential to modify it opens up the whole Pandora's box about, 'Is this okay to do, and what can we edit? What should we edit?'"

Parra touched upon ethical challenges to the use of genetic prediction and editing. Scientists and ethicists wonder whether people should be able to know whether they're going to suffer from certain diseases ahead of time.

"I do get a lot of students that are like, 'I don't want that on my conscience,'" Parra said. "I don't want that in my mind because if it's only a certain percentage of chance that something could happen, then anything's possible. There's a chance that you could fall and sprain your ankle. Do you want to know that at the start of the day, yes or no?"

Embryonic gene sequencing has gotten cheaper, but its cost as a non-necessity may be prohibitive for families without the resources to go through with the process. Orchid Health offers medical reports for In Vitro Fertilization (IVF) embryos with a price tag of \$2,500, in which they outline risks for a number of embryos and allow parents to choose which one to keep.

"There's a problem, potentially, where on one hand you get this thing where it is for the rich and the wealthy and it doesn't benefit regular people," Partridge said. "You've got rich people who can pay for these sequencing technologies and have the genome mapped out and get a tailored medical solution for them. Whereas people who can't afford that don't get access to that kind of well-curated healthcare."

Problems with the protection of personal genetic data Nagy outlined another scenario where gene editing could have class or economic repercussions.

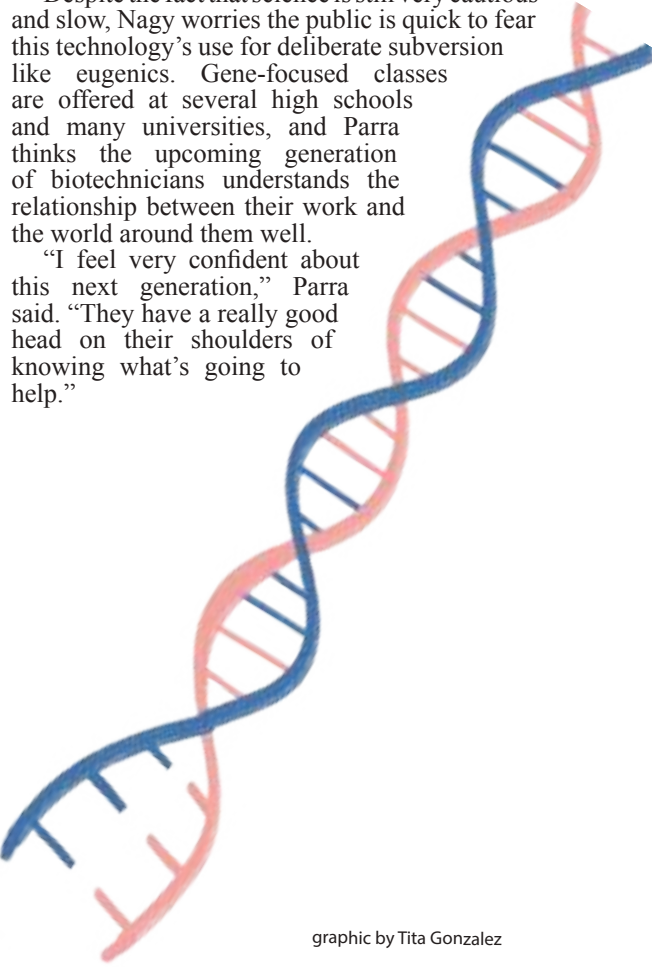
"You can be identified as having a predisposition to a very severe disorder that comes down the line, and your health insurance company denies you," Nagy said. "And they don't tell you why, because they don't want to treat you down the line, right? So it's very dangerous to share your DNA sequence."

The promise of gOther people find hope in the future of genetic editing also inspires hope, especially while the technology is in its early stages. If recent progress continues seeing how much progress has been made recently, it's they consider it possible that the technology will become safer and cheaper within the coming years. Nonetheless, a significant problem genetic sequencing faces is public perception.

"People just don't trust scientists anymore, and there's a huge failure from the scientists' side to really communicate what we're doing in a way that makes it less scary," Nagy said. "Everybody always goes to the extreme: 'okay, we're going to be making blonde, blue-eyed babies.' We can't do that. We don't know all the genes that are required for making a blue-eyed baby."

Despite the fact that science is still very cautious and slow, Nagy worries the public is quick to fear this technology's use for deliberate subversion like eugenics. Gene-focused classes are offered at several high schools and many universities, and Parra thinks the upcoming generation of biotechnicians understands the relationship between their work and the world around them well.

"I feel very confident about this next generation," Parra said. "They have a really good head on their shoulders of knowing what's going to help."



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

Trump

from page 1

Since D.C. was made the U.S. capitol in 1790, it has enjoyed limited self-determination, protected by the 1973 Home Rule Act. However, Congress is the ultimate authority over the district, which holds a unique status of centralized federal power yet no federal representation.

"It felt less about making people safer and more about sending a message," Holscher said. "And the thing is, if the federal government had just given D.C. the resources it spent on this whole operation, the city could probably have reached the same results without losing control of its own police force."

Michael Mosser, an Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Government and the International Relations and Global Studies program at the University of Texas, echoed Holscher's sentiment that other factors may have been at play. Additionally, he pointed out signs the move was less about controlling crime and more about sending a message.

"Short term, this will have limited effects," Mosser said. "The troops in place in Washington are not necessarily in places that are actually suffering from high crime rates. Long term, the action has the potential to weaken even further the notion of separation of powers and the notion of posse comitatus, which

essentially means keeping military forces out of policing."

Trump's federalization of the D.C. police force and deployment of the National Guard was unprecedented. The Home Rule Act reserves the president this power in times of an emergency, and this is the first instance of its implementation.

"Presidents have often sought to expand their powers without the hindrance of legislative and judicial oversight," Butts said. "The original concept of our governmental structure was to prevent governing by fiat. The so-called checks and balances, this is being overrun by Trump."

On September 11, Trump's control over D.C.'s police force and local deployment of the National Guard ended. Trump has threatened to take control over D.C. again due to their unwillingness to cooperate with ICE, and suggested imposing similar policies on Chicago, Illinois, and Memphis, Tennessee.

"Overall, I think this is yet more evidence of a maximalist view of executive branch power, and is likely to recede regardless of who is in power," Mosser said.

THE LINE

Global News

Nepal Unrest Erupts

When the Nepali government banned several major social media platforms on Sept. 6, a group of largely Generation Z protesters launched a movement that quickly flamed into a violent revolution. Armed with matches and their phones, young demonstrators set fire to the Nepali's Parliament building, forcing communist Prime Minister Oli Sharma, known for cronyism and oppression, to resign. Taking his place as interim prime minister is Sushila Karki, who was elected over the messaging app Discord. Karki is a former Chief Justice of Nepal and its first female leader. She will be in power until they hold formal elections in March.

National News

Shutdown Takes Hold

As the Sept. 30 midnight deadline for a congressional budget came and went, the federal government entered a shutdown. NBC reported that roughly 750,000 federal employees, working in national parks, hospitals, and defense agencies, received furloughs, suspensions of their pay for an indefinite period. The shutdown came after President Donald Trump withheld \$4 billion in foreign aid from a previous appropriation, which Democrats are now trying to prevent, refusing to give Republicans the 60-vote supermajority they need. Democrats are working to uphold a reduction in premiums from the Affordable Care Act.

Charlie Kirk Assassinated

Conservative activist Charlie Kirk, known for argumentative political discourse that energized young people around President Donald Trump, was shot in the neck during a rally at Utah Valley University on Sept. 10. The 31-year-old passed away several hours later that day. Although many politicians condemned the perpetrator, 22-year-old Tyler Robinson, several online users praised his action, leading to further political unrest and tension as a polarizing figure suffered a tragic death.

State News

Politicians Announce Senate Campaigns

Several politicians have announced their candidacies for the 2026 Texas U.S. Senate Race. Republican incumbent John Cornyn, a conservative mainstay who represents a pre-Trump ideological idealism, has been challenged by firebrand Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton for the GOP nomination. Democratic nomination seekers include Colin Allred, returning from a lost 2024 Senate campaign, and James Talarico, a young and progressive U.S. representative who utilizes Christian values in his messaging and arguments. Democrats Beto O'Rourke, who ran in the 2018 Senate election, and Joaquin Castro, who attempted the 2020 presidential nomination, have also floated speculations of running.

Hybrid of Blue Jay and Green Jay Appears

To South Texans, the Green Jay is always present: a loud and gregarious bird of backyards and birdbaths. People in other parts of the state are familiar with the Blue Jay, which has a diamond-shaped head and loud crow. Their hybrid, however, is altogether new. Nicknamed the "Grue Jay", a single individual was found near San Antonio. According to VICE, this anomaly is a sign of shifting climate that allows formerly isolated species' ranges to overlap.

Local News

Yogurt Shop Murders Solved

DNA evidence has revealed the killer of four teenage girls in the 1991 Yogurt Shop Murders, a gruesome murder that garnered large media attention. On Sept. 26, 2025, the Austin Police Department announced that comparisons with genealogy databases allowed them to narrow in on Robert Eugene Brashers, who committed suicide in 1999 during a confrontation with police. Similar bullet casings found at the scene of the crime and that of the suicide further confirmed investigators' conclusions. The suspect had been convicted of a number of similar crimes while alive.

Santa Rita Courts to be Renovated

The country's oldest public housing is about to become Austin's newest renovation project. Santa Rita Courts, a subdivision on Second Street in East Austin, has been an affordable home for hundreds of low-income residents since local congressional representative Lyndon Baines Johnson, who would later become president, advocated for its establishment in 1939. The Housing Authority of the City of Austin will demolish some of the buildings to construct multi-story apartments and undertake internal refurbishing of other rooms to include central heating and air, insulation, and amenities such as dryers.

Austin Rebrands

The City of Austin announced a redesign of its 1916 seal on Sept. 4, 2025. The new logo features a green and purple "A" above the word "Austin", which the city said reflected Austin's violet crown skies and green spaces. The update was not without criticism: 94% of responders to a CBS Austin poll answered that they did not like the change. The logo has gone up on the city's official website and will appear on other municipal materials, uniforms and properties.

Don't Like These Summer Visitors? They Like You

Mosquitoes Brought Disease with Their Bites in Recent Austin Summers

ELLINGTON TOUGH | news editor

Austin's warm weather, high human concentration, and frequent rain make the city an ideal haven for several types of mosquitoes, chiefly the invasive *Aedes* genus, distinguishable by the white stripes on their legs and abdomen.

In the summer of 2025, high amounts of rain allowed their population to increase, raising concerns from the city about diseases like West Nile virus, Dengue Fever, and Zika. Josh Lien, owner of the Austin branch of Mosquito Joe, a pest control service that helps get rid of unwelcome insects, often identifies opportunities through which mosquitos can become an issue.

"The key for mosquito breeding is still standing water," Lien said. "Mosquito larvae look like little worms, [and] need organic matter to feed. So when you see a lot of these drainage issues, sometimes we see gutters that are hanging that will hold water, and there's leaves in there as well, bases for flower pots, all of those areas are perfect breeding sites for mosquitoes."

Mosquitoes feed on a plethora of other blood sources, such as farm animals, monkeys, and birds, which carry diseases that the insects spread directly into the bloodstream of humans. Steven Kalder, a professor at the Department of Epidemiology in the University of Texas's Houston Public Health program, compared the current increase in West Nile,

Dengue, and Eastern Equine Encephalitis (EEE) to Ebola, which alarmed the world when it spread from Africa in the 2010s. Mosquito-borne infections which in turn cause these diseases can have mild symptoms such as fever and body aches, but have the potential for serious complications like internal bleeding in the case of Dengue or brain swelling in the case of EEE.

"Africa, in the rainforest there, because there's so much animal, insect, and plant activity, and it's all interacting, there's a greater chance for a mutation to happen there than, say, in the desert, where there's fewer active biological creatures," Kalder said. "So those are places where these diseases are endemic within insects or animals. When they mutate, then they become able to infect people."

Although diseases evolve naturally, Kalder stated that he believes other ongoing changes might be expediting their spread. Climate change has allowed species to move north as global temperatures rise.

"The best answer might be that the climate is changing," Kalder said. "So what used to be just down here in the rainforest is starting to come north. It's going through mosquitoes. Back when I was growing up, there'd be big trucks spraying the whole town with mosquito killers, and that was DDT."

The Food and Drug Administration approves vaccines against dengue fever and malaria, and more are being developed against Zika and West Nile Virus, although no such inoculations are widely administered in the U.S. Khanh Le, an Austin Public Health (APH) Environmental Health Supervisor for the Environmental Health Services (EHS), explained how the appearance of cases prompted the department to prevent the diseases' spread.

"APH looks to prevent cases with a yearly education campaign at the start of mosquito season on how to protect yourself from mosquitoes," Le said. "APH alerts the community through press releases and social media whenever we see our first case of the year."

"EHS begins monitoring for mosquitoes using traps in May of each year," Le said. "Samples are collected from these traps and sent to a Department of State Health Services lab for testing. If any samples come back positive for mosquito-borne diseases, we begin abatement in the area where the sample was collected. Abatement

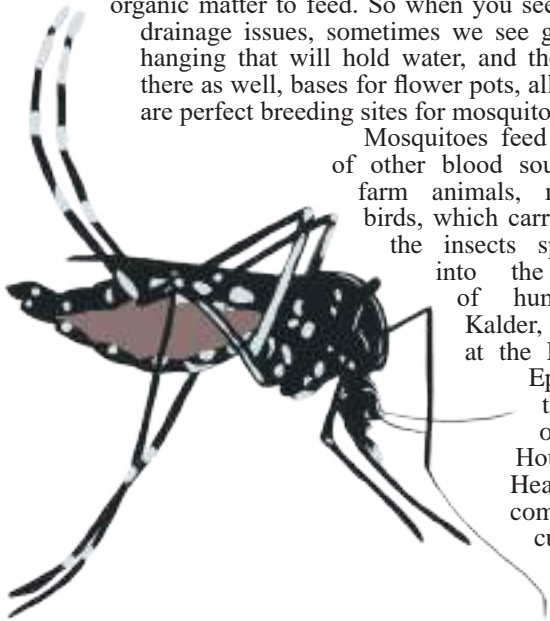
involves using larvicide in standing bodies of water, which kills mosquito larvae but does not affect other wildlife. EHS has also partnered with the department's Community Health Workers to distribute information to residents in the area."

APH has used platforms like the sides of CapMetro buses to spread information about avoiding disease. Their "Four Ds" policy advises being most cautious around dusk and dawn, when West Nile-carrying females are active, dressing in long pants and sleeves, applying DEET, a repellent oil, and draining stagnant water.

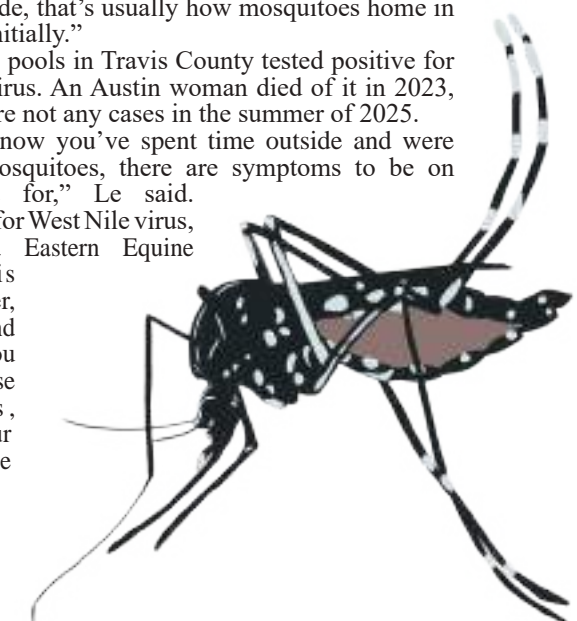
"The most common mosquito repellent is DEET," Lien said. "It's totally separate from the products that pest control use. When I say it's a mosquito repellent, a lot of these botanical oils, how they work is they interfere with the mosquito's ability to detect us. So as we're breathing out, we're exhaling carbon dioxide, that's usually how mosquitoes home in on its prey initially."

Last year, pools in Travis County tested positive for West Nile Virus. An Austin woman died of it in 2023, but there were not any cases in the summer of 2025.

"If you know you've spent time outside and were bitten by mosquitoes, there are symptoms to be on the lookout for," Le said. "Symptoms for West Nile virus, dengue, and Eastern Equine Encephalitis include fever, headaches, and a rash. If you develop these symptoms, contact your healthcare provider."



graphics by Tita Gonzalez



Ukraine War Rages On Special Sessions Conclude

JONAH TRIMBLE | staff writer

Since the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine in 2022, the Russo-Ukrainian War has consumed both countries and involved many more. Hundreds of thousands have been killed, whether by bullets on the battlefield or bombs in their homes, and millions more have fled the region to protect themselves or their family. Although ceasefires have recently made headlines, the seemingly intractable war continues to upend lives.

Conflict in Ukraine has been ongoing since Russia's invasion and annexation of the Crimean peninsula in 2014 and its support of the pro-Russian proxy paramilitaries in Donbas. It enveloped Ukraine from the north, east, and south, near the border with Russia and Belarus in 2022, when Russia invaded the Donbas region of eastern and southern Ukraine and attempted approaching the capital city of Kyiv, supporting pro-Russian groups with ground forces and aerial attacks. According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), they have taken control of several regions adjacent to Crimea and the Russian border. Because of their proximity to Russia, many of these areas include local rebel groups that support unification with Russia. Cristian Vlas, the Assistant Research Manager at ACLED's Eastern Europe desk, explained one reason the war has not reached an end: Ukraine has persistently pushed back on all of Russia's advances and requests, amounting to a situation of capitulation.

"Russia and its misinformed intelligence services thought that Ukraine would turn against its own government, seeing how Zelenskyy's government was unpopular before and during the pandemic, disappointing with its economic and anti-corruption reforms," Vlas said. "This banking was wrong. We actually saw a different kind of response from the Ukrainian army, from civil society, from civilians."

Devastating attacks on both sides have taken thousands of soldier and civilian lives. The death toll is currently at around 14,500 people and is still growing. Co-founder of the U.S.-Ukraine Foundation, Robert McConnell, described how the memory of the Soviet Union, under which they lived from 1922 to 1991, pushed Ukrainians to resist Russia in this way.

"The people of Ukraine either lived under the Soviet suppression, or are the children of those who did, meaning they remember having to whisper at the dinner table because they didn't know who was spying on them," McConnell said. "They remember the food shortages, they remember people vanishing and ending up in the Gulag, they remember what it was like not to be free. They know what they are fighting for, and they know there would be no freedom under Putin."

McConnell stated the conflict has been inevitable since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The conflict has been brewing ever since the collapse, and tensions seemed to only be getting higher. Ukraine's 2013 refusal to join the Eurasian Economic Union signaled that the nations were moving apart, leading Russia to react.

"In August 1991, the Ukrainian parliament passed a Declaration of Independence that conditioned actual independence on a referendum set for December 1, 1991," McConnell said. "The referendum passed with a 93 percent approval and Ukraine became independent peacefully. That did not sit well with Putin, who has said over and over that the greatest tragedy of the 20th century was the collapse of the Soviet Union.

So, in 2014, Putin and the Russian Federation started a war, forcing Ukraine to fight its war of independence."

Ashley Moran is a lecturer and research scientist at the University of Texas at Austin who specializes in Eastern European conflicts. She explained how the last decade of strife has worsened a feeling of fear.

"The war in Ukraine has had devastating humanitarian impacts on the Ukrainian population, with over 10 million people displaced, some one million forcibly relocated from Ukraine to Russia, including thousands of children, and an estimated 42,000 civilians wounded or killed," Moran said. "This spring, the World Bank estimated that Ukraine will need \$524 billion in recovery costs to rebuild its infrastructure and economy. These impacts only continue to rise as the war continues."

Although both countries have floated the possibility of peace talks between leaders, Zelenskyy and Putin have not met since 2019. In August, American President Donald Trump stepped in to attempt a peace deal, but it quickly fell through.

"There will not be a negotiated peace between Ukraine and Russia any time soon, as Russia is demanding concessions that Ukraine has long rejected," Moran said. "Russia has illegally annexed or occupied large swaths of Ukrainian land, Crimea in 2014, and Donetsk, Luhansk, Kherson, and Zaporizhzhia in 2022. It now demands Ukraine's withdrawal from these territories as part of any peace deal. Ukraine is fighting to retain these territories and to protect its citizens still living in these territories, and has thus forcefully rejected the concession of land to Russia. These are fundamentally incompatible positions that make a peace deal improbable for now."

Russian President Vladimir Putin has suggested that Ukrainian identity is not separate from Russia, and publicly claimed that Russian speakers living in eastern Ukraine were being unjustly oppressed as justification for their invasion. The lack of progress towards peace is often attributed to Putin, who has turned down non-violent resolutions with Ukraine.

"I could list a number of meetings billed as efforts to reach some type of agreement, but that would play into the hands of those who, for their own reasons, want to think there is a chance of a peaceful agreement," McConnell said. "This would be a denial of the fundamental reality that Putin has any interest in peace. He has made it clear since at least 2008 that his intention and goal is the elimination of an independent Ukraine and the eradication of any idea that there is/was a Ukraine and a Ukrainian people. All the so-called peace meetings are, from the Russian perspective, delaying tactics allowing the United States and the West to think something is possible."

The conflict has only escalated after three years since the invasion of Donbas, and the toll it has taken on both sides is still growing. Unless peace can be reached between the countries, fighting between the countries will continue until one backs down.

"Back at the time the Soviet Union was coming apart, what would happen in Ukraine was a major western concern," McConnell said. "Washington, our government, worried, and the media like the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Chicago Tribune, all wrote that if Ukraine tries for independence, there will be bloodshed and nuclear chaos."

ELIOT DONMOYER | staff writer

Over several sessions between Jan. and Aug. of 2025, the Texas State Legislature passed 1,225 bills, more than two dozen focusing on public education. Among these, notable ones concern school vouchers, public school funding, the display of the Ten Commandments in schools, and banning of personal communication devices in schools. The passing of these laws have impacted public school students around the state.

LASA senior Luca Sims leads the Student Advocacy Alliance, an organization that promotes student involvement in politics. They attended Texas congressional meetings discussing bills where members of the public could share their thoughts during the most recent legislative sessions.

"The big fight this year was over vouchers," Sims said. "There was a big debate over that and how effective it would be, and we're gonna see that impact pretty soon. I think it will be interesting to see because it may have a really significant impact on the state budget and obviously on Texas kids."

School vouchers, implemented by Senate Bill 2 during the regular session, are a system where students going to private schools receive about \$10,000 each school year from the state government to pay for their attendance. Families will be allowed to claim this payout in the 2026-2027 school year.

"Being a Texas public school student, I think that we shouldn't be putting money into private schools," Sims said. "We should be putting it into public schools because our public schools really need funding, and the impact of the vouchers was not widespread enough to justify the argument that was being made that was like, 'Oh, it will let kids escape from failing public schools.' I think we just shouldn't have failing public schools."

AP U.S. Government and Politics as well as AP U.S. History teacher John Goodell provided his legal opinions on some of the recent bills as a former lawyer, including how school vouchers change recapture. Through recapture, some urban tax money pays for rural schools and other state expenses, and it now pays for school vouchers as well.

"Dallas, Houston, Austin, San Antonio, Fort Worth, they're funding rural areas," Goodell said. "That is done for some equity reasons, but if you're going to add in vouchers to the mix, I wonder if you haven't created a constitutional question that might take it out of, if it were challenged correctly, the state of Texas' hands."

While school vouchers raise concerns about public school funding among students like

Sims, another bill increased public school funding. House Bill 2 will provide \$8.5 billion to finance public school districts, which Grace Ford, another leader of the Student Advocacy Alliance, thought was significant.

"We all know how underfunded our schools are, how that impacts our teachers, our learning environments, and everything," Ford said. "Hopefully this extra money can be helpful."

The bill specified how much of the money must be spent to address these issues. About half of it is required to raise educators' pay based on their work experience, and another portion is set aside for an overhaul on special education funding.

"Funding for Texas public schools hasn't been increased since 2019, up until now, and, of course, we've had massive inflation in that time," Sims said. "I don't even think that the funding that was put towards it gets us back to 2019 funding levels."

Senate Bill 10 was passed in the regular session and requires classrooms to display a specific translation of the Ten Commandments if it is donated. The bill is currently on hold in Austin ISD and several other districts pending a lawsuit. The suit was initiated by multiple different groups, including the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, as they see the bill as an infringement on the first amendment's right to freedom of religion.

"The Ten Commandments in classrooms is a big one because it throws into question previously determined Supreme Court law, or case law, that has said that you shouldn't have prayer or anything like that in a school room," Goodell said.

The 2025 lawsuit challenging SB 10, Rabbi Nathan v. Alamo Heights Independent School District, posited that the bill is a violation of the first amendment on the grounds that it is a constitutional violation of non-religious government and the free practice of religion. Negotiations are ongoing about the meaning of legislation like SB 10 and SB 2, leading Goodell to think defiance is the best policy to save money.

"The most aggressive, very controversial, but potentially effective thing to do would be to refuse to pay recapture, and then if the state took over Austin ISD, you could then claim that that was retaliation," Goodell said. "If you were worried about the school taking you over, 'Hey! If we had more resources, we wouldn't have that problem, and now since we've kept those resources, you're punishing us by taking us over.' And I think a court would really not like that. I think that would be a very uncomfortable argument to have to deal with."



graphic by Paxton Tidrick

graphics by Megan Gerold



REBECA GONZALEZ | features editor

In the fall of 2022, students could be seen roaming the halls and classrooms freely with phones in their hands. Now, in the present day, phones must be legally hidden and restricted, and hall passes must include a specific school-issued name to ensure their authenticity.

Over the past four years, LASA has experienced changes in regulations and freedoms. This issue, the Indepth will reflect on each year individually and its specific changes to regulations on hall walking and phones.

2022-2023:

2022 was a year students were able to access their phones easily. They flipped open their phones when the Queen of England was declared dead in third period one day and joined in on a record-breaking engagement for the FIFA World Cup on their laptops, which, according to FIFA, hosted the most-streamed final in history with over one billion streams.

Senior student council president Isabel Liu, reflected on the rules of phones throughout this year and their involvement in the student culture. To her, even the concept of restrictions was unfathomable.

"During freshman year, for what I can remember, phones weren't really regulated at all," Liu said. "I think some teachers had their own specific preference of kids putting their phones away and whatnot, but I cannot recall any rules on phones."

Even when it came to hall walking, Liu couldn't find any extreme rules. Any rules or regulations were insignificant to her experience.

"I think hall walking has always been lightly regulated through hall passes, one at a time, and not leaving during the first or last ten minutes," Liu said. "But other than that, it was pretty lenient."

Senior Sophia Kim actually found that hall walking had a stronger presence in her freshman year. Although she herself didn't even find herself wandering much, she still appreciated the right.

"Hallwalking was part of the high school experience, but it has been severely restricted by the teacher and admin," Kim said. "It hasn't affected me too much, per se. But it does just seem to be limiting my freedom."



FOUR
OF

FICKLE

2023-2024:

In the fall of 2023, access to technology allowed students to read some of the most read stories, such as the loss of the Titan submarine, and stay updated on major global events. Additionally, after its initial release in 2022 and growth to over 100 million users in 2023, this year would see the rise of ChatGPT.

Liu found that the increase of artificial intelligence plays a role in increased pressure against technology. To her, cheating itself is a trend she began to notice.

"I think the admin themselves wanted to regulate phones because of the cheating issue," Liu said. "There is also the idea that phones are just a distraction during a learning environment, so that's why they've been regulated."

Junior Lauren Sanchez didn't feel affected by any regulation on phones. Compared to her other years, she found that her freshman year was extremely lenient.

"It was a lot more relaxed," Sanchez said. "We were on our phones in almost every corner of the room."

Kim also didn't feel any restriction on phones. However, to her, hall walking was a different story.

"Sophomore year, that's when they really started to enforce or restrict hall walking," Kim said. "There would be a teacher or an admin who would usually stop and catch students in the hallways for hallwalking, and at that point, you did really need to start carrying a hall pass, or I guess make a hall pass."

Sanchez, on the other hand, without the comparison to past years, didn't see much restriction. She simply noticed an effort but weak execution.

"Hall walking was strict [at first]," Sanchez said. "But then after the first week, they never, ever cared again."

002

YEARS

FREEDOM

2024-2025:

In 2024, students lived through a presidential election. Although phones were restricted within classrooms, laptops contained news stories as students tracked major global conflicts, assassination attempts, and the solar eclipse, according to the New York Times' tracker on their most-read stories.

The 2024-2025 school year brought on a new phone policy for students. Liu explained the restrictions, but in retrospect finds them more moderate compared to policies today.

"Junior year phone regulation ramped up slightly," Liu said. "I mean, we just had the phone jail, but you were able to use it during lunch and the passing period."

For Kim, the restrictions were almost completely insignificant. She found a similar trend as before: that the execution of the hall walking policy wasn't very effective.

"Phones had to be locked away in the caddies, but I would say it didn't change too much," Kim said. "There were just additional rules that not many people followed."

However, Liu noted that this policy was made by the school independently. She explained how, from her perspective, this policy focused more on issues affecting the school personally rather than the effects of technology in general.

"I also think phones have been viewed as a source of distraction but also cheating," Liu said. "Our school has had these issues with cheating, and I think that was a major reason besides the actual bill being passed, since that's out of their control."

On the other hand, Sanchez found the restrictions to become more intense. Compared to her freshman year, she found her sophomore year to have increased rules.

"They definitely eventually got a little more strict," Sanchez said. "No phones in class and hall walking suddenly changed when they got security guards."

Liu stood on similar ground with Sanchez when it came to hall walking. She found that, overall, the environment of wandering around the halls was now filled with strict administrators.

Kim did note one security change of students being required to carry around IDs for identification throughout the school when leaving during class. However, similar to other policies this year, she found it to have little effect on students.

"I think junior year was when they began to enforce IDs and [students] were forced to carry their ID," Kim said. "I did not."

2025-2026:

Now in 2025, students are living in the effects of the Texas House Bill 1481. The bill enforces a total ban on any personal communication devices, and to ensure that students comply, if any devices are seen, the official Austin Independent School District (AISD) decision is to take the device till the end of the school day on the first strike.

HB-1481 was passed to ensure an attentive classroom environment focused on teaching without the distraction of technology. However, Liu has found that the choice has instead made a major impact within school environments.

"It's senior year," Liu said. "And the new legal regulations of phones have been a big change."

For Kim, with the legal repercussions of using a phone during school hours and AISD policy allowing for the destruction of a phone held by a student for over 60 days, she has found that this policy is intense for students. On the other hand, the intense spotlight on phones has created a more forgiving perspective on hall walking regulations.

"Well, phones are supposed to be turned off, powered off, and in your backpack," Kim said. "Hall walking- yeah, not allowed. At this point, it hasn't been allowed for a few years, but it ultimately depends on your teacher."

Overall, Kim does agree with the bill's goal. Initially, in the bill's description, she saw very little conflict with its intended purpose.

"I think it's an attempt to promote more education and listening," Kim said. "You have to focus in class more, can't skip, and only sit there and listen to lectures and teachers. You can't use your phone, so you're less distracted."

Liu also finds herself agreeing with the bill's intended achievement. She explained that she finds herself distracted by technology and agrees that the removal of technology would create a positive impact overall.

"I do agree that many of my friends, I, and many people I know are frequently distracted by our phones and technology, and some personal devices have more distracting functions than Chromebooks, of course," Liu said. "So I do see the purpose and benefit of putting away these distractions."

Now with the bill implemented, Liu also finds that it is achieving its goal. Compared to past years, though she sees a lot of restriction but also a lot more attentiveness in class.

"I think I've seen a lot more engagement in class," Liu said. "Maybe I'm being biased because I've been a lot more engaged in class, but I feel like every class I've been in has been more focused on learning."

As student council president, Liu has found that the new bill is hurtful to clubs. Between scheduling meetings and gaining new members, limited communication has challenged growth.

"I think with the phone regulation, it's so much harder to communicate with people during the school day because sometimes you need to find people for a certain event and different things to talk to them about, like academics and extracurricular activities," Liu said. "But, it's difficult to do that now because nobody can know when they get an email or something."

As a member of LASA Lacrosse, a club sport, Sanchez agreed with Liu that a lack of communication can make it difficult to grow sports teams, especially for less-funded teams.

"It's become more difficult to sign up for clubs, and we used to be able to send texts before meetings, but we cannot do that anymore," Sanchez said. "Participation has been hard"

Additionally, as an officer for HOSA, Kim related to the difficulty of running a club without communication. For her, the recruitment process has changed completely.

"Since we can't pull out phones to scan QR codes, we have to fill out Google forms, and since we can't text each other, we have to send emails through our school accounts that are censored and block outside emails," Kim said. "So overall, it's been very difficult to organize meetings."

As for teachers, Liu has found that many have been uniquely restricted. Now that all students are forced to utilize AISD Chromebooks, they are also forced to face the myriad of blocked websites, according to Liu.

"I've heard a lot of teachers, specifically my math teachers, have specific websites they really love to use for their teaching, and they can't use them anymore because they're suddenly blocked on Chromebooks," Liu said. "I think that is a big issue for teachers."

However, besides clubs, Kim has also found personal issues with the restrictions on phones. A major criticism to HB-1481 was not accounting for the lack of communication readily available for an emergency, and Kim has faced their own trouble.

"I had to leave school early, but I wasn't able to communicate to my parents that I'd be a bit late," Kim said. "So, they were just waiting in the parking lot for 30 minutes, and when I got to the car, of course, they were mad at me."

Kim believes that the restrictions are intense. She finds the complete block of communication to be limiting simple communication requirements for normal day-to-day lives.

For Liu, the ban on communication isn't necessarily negatively impacting her daily life, but the effect on the quality of work is. For her, the permitted technology's poor quality limits students.

"As a student, taking away our phones and all our communication devices like iPads, laptops, and even headphones was pushing it a bit," Liu said. "Personally, I do kind of love this idea of tuning out devices from online and being in the moment at school for learning, but I feel like this personal device ban is taking a step down in technology. Maybe if we had more funding, they could provide better devices."

Looking forward, if the bill continues for decades, Kim doesn't see any of HB-1481's intended changes occurring. To her, the distaste for the ban against phones could only exacerbate what it was trying to regulate.

"People underestimate the phone addiction of this generation," Kim said. "I assume students will forever find another way to bring phones or technology in."

003

004

Highlighting LASA Raptor Mascot: Blue

EMANI SCOTT-SMITH | staff writer

Beyond just a costume and cheers, the Velociraptor embodies the spirit, strength, and unity of the LASA community. From sideline cheers to pep rallies, the costume is donned each year to encourage school pride among the student population.

Because the secret identity of the mascots can be so crucial to maintaining their mascot effect, it's important that they remain silent throughout their performance during games and pep rallies. One of the students who represents the mascot, Blue the Raptor, explained why it's important to keep its identity a secret.

"I don't think they want people giving an actual face to the mascot," Blue said. "They want the mascot to be its own thing. And if they start speaking, that might break some people's interpretations of the mascot. I'm sure some people kind of build up like, oh, the mascot sounds like this, or the mascot might sound like this. If they actually hear me start speaking, it's like, okay, that's not what I thought it was going to sound like."

LASA has two students dress up as the mascot and go to games. According to Alvarado, because of the nature of the costume and the temperature outside, being a mascot is no small feat.

"I think that people don't really understand how athletically inclined you need to be to be able to be the mascot," Alvarado said. "...and the amount of stamina and endurance you need to be able to handle being in the costume."

Although being the mascot may seem like a simple job, there's more than meets the eye, according to Blue. In Blue's opinion, the job of the mascot is to support the other aspects of the event they are attending.

"You're doing enough so that it looks like you're entertaining, but you're not kind of stealing the show," Blue said. "Because it's

a giant mascot, people are going to look at that. That part's pretty fun, but the part that I think is most fun is when you go up to the bleachers and just kind of mess around with people for a bit and take pictures."

Vivien Loving is a senior and a cheerleader, and she has been a part of the cheer team since her junior year. She stated that the



RALLY DAY WONDERS Raptor mascot Blue gets students excited during the homecoming pep rally. The mascot helps encourage the student body to participate and showcase their school spirit. photo by Lily Anthony

on a mascot being there every game," Loving said. "It really helps the cheer team to keep our energy up: to hype us up and hype the crowd up, making everything super fun."

For both the student body and the cheerleading team, the mascot means more than just a costume. According to Loving, it represents all that is positive about the spirit of LASA: the drive, kindness, and generosity that inhabit the students.

"The aspect of having a mascot there makes everything so much more exciting and impactful," Loving said. "When I see Blue on the sidelines, I feel encouraged to cheer louder and stronger. It reminds me why I came to LASA: to be the best person I can be."

The LASA Raptor is more than just a striking figure at our events; it represents the dedication and spirit of our entire school community. The choice of the Raptor as our mascot highlights our uniqueness and ambition, setting us apart from the usual options. Being a mascot goes beyond wearing a costume; it's about embodying the energy and pride of our school. The effort, stamina, and involvement required to fully embrace this role reflect the strength and unity we strive for at LASA.

Megan Gerold and Ellington Tough contributed to this article

mascot supports the cheer team and is an essential part of sporting events.

"I think that by having a mascot, especially being able to rely

Introducing New Staff

LAUREN VANDERVEEN | student life editor
KEILA RODRIQUEZ | staff writer
REBECA GONZALEZ | features editor



Photo by Ellington Tough

Tiffany Lee, a LASA German teacher, went to the University of Kansas. She has a passion for the viola, and teaches private lessons on the weekends. "Classical music, as a viola teacher, it's both my passion and inspiration," Lee said. She also shares why she loves to teach. "I love helping students grow into open-minded, curious global citizens," Lee said. She mentions that one of the best pieces of advice that she has ever received is "Be true to yourself — that's the key to real happiness."

Photos courtesy LASA Admin



Jonathan Goode is from Waelder, TX. He went to Rice University in Houston. He is a college counselor at LASA, and enjoys his job because "It's always fun watching students reflect on and understand who they are and imagine what their next great adventure will be." The best piece of advice he's ever received is, "You can always add more, but you can never take it out." His favorite restaurant is Chuy's and Jack Allen's, his favorite genre of music is R&B and Pop Punk, and he loves to snack on anything with sugar.



Susan Durham is from Houston, Texas, and she went to the University of Houston, and later the University of St. Thomas. At LASA, she is an academic counselor, and enjoys, "meeting students and being part of their journey through high school." The best piece of advice she's ever received is that "its an inside job, and forgiveness heals all." Her favorite restaurant in Austin is Spa's, her favorite genre of music is R&B, and she loves to snack on sweet potato chips.

Legislature Club Changes

NIK BAYER | staff writer

New laws in place are banning students from participating in LGBTQ+ clubs, preventing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs, and prohibiting students from joining any club without parental permission.

Senate Bill (SB) 12, also known as the "Parents' Bill of Rights," was introduced in February 2025 and remained a bill until June 20, 2025, when Governor Greg Abbott signed it into law. The goal of SB 12 was to expand parental rights in public education and eliminate diversity in schools. SB 12 has received a very negative reaction from many students, parents, and teachers.

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) has filed on behalf of dozens of students and parents against government agencies after they removed books and altered curriculum, arguing that this ban infringes on the First Amendment right to freedom of expression. Kimberly Pettigrew, an AP U.S. History teacher at LASA, explained how the new laws affect students' choices when joining clubs.

"Students are going to have fewer options when it comes to clubs they can join," Pettigrew said. "Especially because you have to have the parental permissions, and the fact that you cannot have any type of club that deals with gender identity and sexual orientation."

By banning DEI programming, LASA freshman Mira Cons explained that SB 12 has impacted the different viewpoints of students. She added that the new law limits the education of different cultures and viewpoints.

"SB 12 is framed as a way to protect your child from these things and to take back your child's education," Cons said. "But what taking back your child's education means in the context of this bill is censoring different values, creating this narrative of only one specific viewpoint, and blocking out the values of other people and history in current clubs and media, and showing your child a view that isn't truly authentic."

LGBTQ+ clubs have become places where students can express themselves in an accepting environment. Pettigrew explained how the new laws restricting them will impact students' school experiences.

"The loss of community, or a space where you can feel safe, is certainly going to have negative effects," Pettigrew said. "How negative those effects are, I don't know."

According to Cons, LGBTQ+ clubs are safe spaces for students, yet are know having to adjust to changes. Sullivan Randall, a LASA Pride Alliance (LPA) leader, mentioned how the bill impacts groups such as LPA.

"SB12 fails at everything it tries to do," Randall said. "It's very specific with what it prohibits and 100 percent targeted. Even though it tries to ban clubs such as LPA, we're still able to meet almost the exact same as we did last year. Lots of other clubs aren't able to label themselves the same way they once did, but are perfectly okay after the smallest rebrand. The point is no law can keep people from gathering."

Not only is this law controversial for its restriction of expression, but Cons shared that some students have the opinion that it violates human rights. She explained how the new law infringes on the right to freedom of speech.

"The First Amendment right is free speech and your ability to choose what you wish to do," Cons said. "I think, again, the media censorship that has been going on recently is exactly that, but in schools."

Those against LGBTQ+ clubs may be under the impression that they push their agenda on others; however, in most situations, that's not the case. Cons explained how clubs are just a way of expressing individuality and don't harm anyone.

"[LGBTQ+ clubs] are not this big thing; clubs are just a way to have fun with friends. A way to feel safe," Cons said. "It doesn't have to be more than you want it to be. It is just about what a student wants to do, and that should not be policed by a state."

This law affects every public school across Texas, with other states in the south following suit with similar bills. Schools are required to follow this law, but they are allowed to interpret it themselves.



graphic by Megan Gerold

AISD

from page 1

“The important thing to know is that there are a lot of rules and regulations because this is a government-funded program...” Grodek said. “The only way that we get money is if we sell a meal... [Students and families] need to know that it is a tight budget... and there are a lot of regulations. It’s not that we don’t want to put salt and sugar in your food, it’s that we’re truly not allowed.”

Because of the low budget, the AISD lunch team has to be resourceful. According to Grodek, they buy all of their ingredients in bulk in an effort to cut costs. This means the chefs at AISD have to be creative with their cooking.

“You might see something like a chicken tender,” Grodek said. “A chicken tender is served with



graphic by The Gonzales

tater tots for an elementary school kid. But then it will be tossed with a scratch buffalo sauce, and that’ll go on a wrap, and you’ll see that in high school and middle schools. Then you’ll also see it on our salads, and then you’ll also see it on a Greek dish. We try to be versatile.”

Grodek and her team take care to make sure school lunches are both good for kids as well as good-tasting. Because of this, when students complain, Grodek explained that they do their best to make changes.

“We taste test everything. Two years ago, we kept hearing and tasting that the pizza was not good, so we brought in like eight different kinds of pizza,” Grodek said. “Then we took those and we brought them to two different high schools on either end of town, two different middle schools, and then we had those kids taste test it.”

The school lunches that the AISD lunch team works so hard on play an important role in the daily lives of students. As such, Grodek encouraged students to buy school lunches and works to provide lunches for everyone who needs them.

“If you can make the choice that you can buy school lunch, you’re participating in a real community giving,” Grodek said. “Every meal that we make, you are helping our local economy.”

Post Halloween Haze

ZOE PERALES | staff writer

The day after Halloween, school feels different. Students stumble into class half asleep, buzzing from candy, too tired to focus, leaving teachers to deal with rooms full of half-attentive teenagers. Although a day off after Halloween uses up school time, many students may benefit from the time off.

Whether it’s trick-or-treating, hanging out with friends, or going to parties, most students don’t get home until much later than usual. An NIH study shows that the lack of sleep and distracted thinking impacts students’ engagement and understanding of the school curriculum. LASA freshman Catherine Mombel explained that the day after Halloween is one of the hardest times of the year for teachers.

“I think students should have a day off after Halloween because it would be a nice rest day,” Mombel said. “It would benefit both teachers and students because teachers wouldn’t have to waste their energy teaching kids who aren’t really willing to be there.”

Mombel explained that not every student spends Halloween night celebrating, and for some, it’s just another school night. She also explained that the day after could still be useful, even for someone who doesn’t celebrate.

“As someone who doesn’t celebrate, I still think it would be a good rest day where I can catch up on work,” Mombel said. “If someone who doesn’t celebrate doesn’t have homework to catch up on either, that’s even better.”

Lack of sleep is already a huge issue for high school students. A 2018 CDC study found that 73% of high school students do not get enough sleep on school nights. Better Health stated that the recommended amount of sleep for teenagers is 8-10 hours per night, but most only get around 6.5-7.5 hours of sleep. According to the American Association of Sleep Technologists, after a night like Halloween, this problem is even worse. Hershner and Chervin, researchers at the University of Michigan, reported that tired students don’t learn as well, and teachers have to slow down lessons the next day to keep everyone caught up.

Perspective from students highlighted ways school schedules can be improved. Freshman Kay Chukwunyelum explained that a day off could actually make school more productive overall.

“A day off after Halloween would be great,” Chukwunyelum said. “I think a lot of teachers wouldn’t have to adjust their schedules as much, you know? And the kids would be grateful for it, even the ones who don’t celebrate. It’s a win-win.”

Freshman Rubi Dahal explained her view on the topic and shared her firsthand experience as a student. According to her, after Halloween, students aren’t prepared to learn.

“Every year after Halloween, kids come to school energetic, but no one’s really in the mood to learn,” Dahal said. “I think a day off could be a good catch-up day and very effective in terms of how school will be the following day. I’d love that, honestly.”

While a day off after Halloween isn’t likely to be added to the school calendar, students like freshman Mombel, Dahal, and Chukwunyelum say it would make the following days more productive. Whether through extra sleep, time to catch up on work, or simply a chance to reset, the idea reflects how a small change could cause a difference in student lives.

From Afghanistan to Austin: The Daadmans’ Journey

ELLINGTON TOUGH | news editor

For LASA parent Kamal Khan Daadman, choosing to move to Austin and send his children to LASA was the easy part of his journey from southeastern Afghanistan in 2017. The hard part was learning English, navigating an unfamiliar school system, and supporting a family of 12 as they moved to the opposite side of the globe.

Recently, Afghanistan’s history has been one of constant conflict, as the Soviet Union, then the U.S., invaded the country, creating instability and strife. So when he got the opportunity, he left his job as a professor at the local university and took his family, 10 people at the time, to Austin.

“I was born in a war,” Daadman said. “I grew up in a war, I got my gray hair in a war, and my children were born in a war. To save my family’s lives, that was one of the biggest reasons.”

Daadman was interested in Virginia or California, where his colleagues were already living, but the U.S. Embassy informed him they weren’t able to accept more immigrants. After researching the cost of living in different states, Daadman settled on Texas, though Austin appealed to him for a more spiritual reason.

“I really like the name of Austin,” Daadman said. “Austin seemed to me to be a manly name... I have read the secret book that talks about the universe, and I have read how people connect with each other and can picture a person or a place through the frequencies of their thoughts and get feedback. Believe it or not, I already had pictures of Austin in my mind. The day I

“I was born in war. I grew up in a war, I got my gray hair in a war, and my children were born in a war. To save my family’s lives, that was one of the biggest reasons.”

- KAMAL DAADMAN, LASA PARENT

came here, I went downtown, and it looked exactly like what I made a picture of.”

Daadman’s children barely got a chance to sleep off the jetlag before they began their American education, attending a range of schools in East Austin, including Gus Garcia Young Men’s Leadership Academy, a boys’ middle school. Going to Gus Garcia entailed learning yet another culture for Rahmanullah, one of Kamal’s sons, who graduated from LASA in 2025. AISD reports that 73.5% of its students are English language learners, and although the Daadman brothers added to that statistic, they also stood out: they spoke Pashto, not Spanish like their classmates.

“It was probably half Spanish, half English, but at the same time, I wasn’t really fluent in any of those, so mine was a completely different language,” Rahmanullah said. “I was still learning English when I heard about LASA. It was a competitive school. I heard that it was good teachers, good materials. Sounds like that’s the best place for me, because I was really competitive in Garcia.”

Current LASA junior Lutfullah Daadman also attended Gus

Garcia, where he began to develop the skills that would bring him to, then through, LASA. He credited his reading abilities, which started at zero in a language whose writing system was entirely different from Pashto’s Arabic script, to a friend from elementary school: Michael.

“In the beginning, I didn’t know English at all,” Lutfullah said. “He was sitting at my table, and he helped me through all of it, the whole year. He would help me write and read it out loud. It was popcorn reading with him.”

Through this system, each would read one word or sentence, allowing both to practice and learn as they alternated. At the same time, Lutfullah was able to help Michael with math throughout elementary and middle school.

“I was good at math because it’s a common language,” Lutfullah said. “But English, I wasn’t really good at. I don’t know why he helped me. I didn’t ask him.”

Currently, the only member of the family attending LASA is Lutfullah, but his brother is planning to join him as a freshman next year. Out of the 10 children in the family, two have already graduated from LASA, with the first two having gone to the International School to learn English.

Lutfullah knew LASA’s rigor would challenge him, but that added to its appeal. At Gus Garcia, he found the coursework less compelling and that the academic environment was meager. Despite Islam defining his childhood, the most important cultural factors to Lutfullah were academic, not religious.

“You have to be present,” Lutfullah said. “I didn’t really focus on thinking, ‘He’s Christian, or he’s Hindu.’ That didn’t bother me. I was here to learn.”

Despite the school system’s longer hours, Lutfullah has not missed a single day of school in more than two years. He explained that his educational arc led him to value LASA’s rigor.

“Here it’s eight hours a day,” Lutfullah said. “Over there, it was like three hours, so it was a major change. I didn’t really like it. None of my siblings liked it. For eight hours, your day is just spent at school. But I think that’s good, because throughout eight hours, we learn different subjects, we talk about certain things.”

As the logistical challenges of Austin faded over time, the cultural barriers remained as long as the family preserved their own identity. Dressed in a thawb, the traditional long-sleeve robe popular in Afghanistan and throughout the Arab world, Daadman explained how his family balances national influences.

“24/7, I wear this type of clothes,” Daadman said. “My children, when they come home, they use Afghan cultural clothes. And when they go to school, they wear a Western outfit.”

Although the Daadmans have adopted parts of American culture, they make an effort to preserve their heritage in their home, which is adorned with Afghan carpets and curtains. When they have a chance, the children enjoy playing cricket in local parks, and everyone joins for their monthly dinner of Kabuli Pulao, a dish with rice and meat, around the dastarkhan, a long, low-down table.

“You can’t forget tradition. I still speak Pashto because I do not want to forget it,” Rahmanullah said. “At Texas State, I met this guy who speaks Pashto, but he’s from Pakistan. It was really nice when I met him, and I’m honored that he was speaking Pashto.”

Being one of the older siblings, it took longer for Rahmanullah to grasp English, which has a structure completely different from Pashto. He finally felt he was fluent during his first year at LASA, though his writing from that time showed his unfamiliarity with the language.

“We wrote our senior selves letters, and when I read that letter, I was like, ‘No way I was writing like this. This is some fifth-grade level writing,’” Rahmanullah said. “I think if I went to a different high school, I wouldn’t have thought about that.”

Rahmanullah doesn’t have to worry about fifth-grade-level

writing now, however. He’s studying engineering at Texas State University, where his older brother Ehsanullah graduated with honors.

“The last seven semesters, Ehsanullah’s been on the Dean’s list,” Daadman said. “Most of the other students were dreaming about it, but he was in every single semester, taking

“You can’t forget tradition. I still speak Pashto because I do not want to forget it.”

- RAHMANULLAH DAADMAN, LASA 2025 ALUMNI

pictures with the dean.”

While Daadman is proud of his children, he’s also firm with them. Knowing that it would be no small feat to go from refugees to the top of the class, he used their family dynamics to uplift the scholars instead of hindering them.

“As soon as we understood that GPA has the most important role, I just told my children, ‘hey, a new mission’s started,’” Daadman said. “So focus on GPA. No one needs to get a B, so everyone needs to get an A. If anyone in my family since then gets a B, the rest of the children call him Mr. B.”

Daadman now spends almost all of his time working as an Uber driver. Although he knows it’s a far cry from his work in Afghanistan teaching English and business, the reward is worth it to Daadman.

“I really did not come here to enjoy my life, because as you can see, I cannot enjoy my life,” Daadman said. “I am here only for my children, to have them enjoy their lives. They will be the next generation, they will be working, building America, working, building communities, working hard to make things better and better.”

LASA Art Community

MADDIE DIAS-STANG | staff writer

Whether someone is a professional or has never picked up a paintbrush, there is a place for them in the LASA art community. Around the art rooms, clubs, and halls of LASA, artwork that students have worked tirelessly on is proudly presented.

While LASA is often recognized for its academic excellence, the arts programs give students the freedom to be creative. Carter Stanley, a junior at LASA, expressed her love for nature and inspiration when it comes to creating art.

"I get really inspired by nature... I also get really inspired by a lot of older things like Greek classical architecture and older artists like Van Gogh, Dali, et cetera," Stanley said. "Every day, when I look up at the sky, it's always doing something really interesting. It's so cool. I could get my inspiration anywhere as long as I'm looking at the sky."

Junior Resie Reppuhn, a Painting 2 and AP Studio Art student, utilizes technology. In modern times, using advanced technology can be helpful, according to Reppuhn.

"My primary sources of inspiration have to be from Pinterest," Reppuhn said. "Because I'm like, 'who doesn't use Pinterest?' I like images from there instead of Google because Google has some pretty basic stuff."

While Reppuhn's inspiration often comes from the internet, Udosen's comes from real life and experiences. She brings together different cultures and people in her artwork to create something new.

"I like to represent people and cultures, like my culture," Udosen said. "I really like that I can create a whole new world, and I can represent people in a whole new way just by painting it."

LASA offers a variety of art classes at different levels. This allows students to receive criticism and shape their art, according to Reppuhn.

"When I was in Art 1 in freshman year, I would be like, 'Oh, my art is so good,'" Reppuhn said. "Then everyone around me at the table would be better than me, and then the teacher would say, 'Oh, you have to fix these things and these things', which

had never really happened to me."

Criticism and practice allows artists to become more successful. According to Stanley, it takes a lot of time and repetition to complete one piece.

"If it's something that I see, then I'll take a picture of it, just to get the composition down and get the idea down," Stanley said. "From there, I do a bunch of sketches, over and over and over again. Once I have one that I'm really satisfied with, I take that and put it on a larger scale so I can really turn that into what I'm looking for."

An artist's ability also changes over the course of one piece. Junior artist Akweano Udosen described her process for her current project, explaining how her ideas evolved as she developed the piece.

"My most recent piece is a bunch of photos, and I'm painting them all to make it into one painting," Udosen said. "Over time, I was looking through more photos, and I found things that worked for the piece, and then I finally have started to paint the rest of it and figure out what I want it to be."

Art students bring together many of their interests when creating their works. Reppuhn highlighted how she brings together both her love of music and art.

"I'm most proud of my Billy Idol drawing that I made," said Reppuhn. "But since we're doing quick sketches of fifty different things, probably my Dave Mustaine or my Kurt Hammett drawing."

Students also take inspiration from things that they have and will learn in class to create their art. Stanley is utilizing color theory as a tool for her dream piece.

"I wanna create something really colorful," Stanley said. "A lot of my pieces are really gray and black and white. I really like color theory a lot, and I want to have a better understanding of it so I can make something that's completely like 'wow.'"

Other artists, though, have different styles that they use. For example, while Udosen incorporates a lot of color into her art, sometimes artists want to experiment with new styles. Udosen also stated that she wants to try using different mediums.

"I keep getting these ideas, and I don't like clay that much, but of life-sized faces I wanna make," Udosen said. "I might make one soon, but the materials are hard to find. And I want to use reusable materials, of course, but I want to make a giant life-sized screaming head, and I want it to be realistic, very realistic."

The only way for artists to become better, though, is to practice. According to Stanley, passion is what fuels an artist to practice and refine their craft.

"Do it. It's so easy to get into your own head about how you're not good at art. Really, the whole thing is you just have to practice," Stanley said. "Even doodling on a scratch piece of paper during class. Whatever you can do to get better."

Makers and Markets

ABBEY WU
GEORGIA FINK | entertainment editors

From anywhere in the suburbs to central Austin, there is always a weekend when markets take place. Along with the many farmers markets, there are also opportunities to attend craft markets with local vendors that sell everything from handmade bags to skin products.

The South Congress Makers Market is a craft market that occurs every week from Friday to Sunday. They host local, small businesses that sell a variety of items from vintage clothing to handmade goods. The market brings together artisans that make products that fit in well with the surroundings. This along with the business of the location are a major draw for some vendors. This is true for Isai, one of the owners of Wisdom Home and Skincare.

"This [was] our first time here, but we thought we'd give it a try and it's somewhere right downtown," Isai said. "We feel like our products fit right with the culture, chemical free."

There is a lot of time that goes into the set up of a market like this. Trey Mumford, the organizer of this market and manager of Güero's, a taco shop also on South Congress, described how long the setup takes.

"We get here, right at 5:00 in the morning," Mumford said. "Everyone helps each other get set up with tables. It's usually about two hours to get everything ready."

Not only is it time consuming to get the entire market set up, but individual vendors also work hard to perfect their booths over time. Warren Sawyer, the co-owner of a jewelry store called Black and Bluebird Studios, said that there is a lot of work that goes into this process.

"[It] is way more like setting up a mobile boutique than just a little tent," Sawyer said. "You learn over the years from leaving something at home or making mistakes, I sort of have a mental checklist. It's pretty easy for us now."

Making products takes a lot of time, according to Sawyer. However, depending on how well different products sell at different events, like the various kinds of jewelry that Sawyer makes, vendors are able to easily know what they need to restock for the next market.

"If I'm sold out of something and we know our customers, I'll go to these big printers drawers that pull out and have all kinds of pieces, and I'll search..." Sawyer said. "That will usually take, per piece, about 20 to maybe 30 minutes."

Although these markets are a lot of work, they have many benefits, such as allowing owners to meet their fellow business owner and make connections face to face. Sometimes business owners are even able to obtain business deals through these markets.

"We met someone a few weeks ago, in Barton Creek Mall, they have a market there, and they're interested in putting our products in their store," Isai said. "... Online, you don't get that personal note."

Mumford went into greater detail about in-person markets. He mentioned that it is not only the connections that business owners make with each other, but also customers that make the markets successful. Both of these create opportunities to gain feedback and understand the audience of their products.

"You get to meet people," Mumford said. "We've gained a lot of repeat customers and I think more than just the product, it's the experience of having those conversations."

According to Mumford, vendors that are part of the Makers Market have become a tight knit community. Other vendors, who also want to be a part of a tight community, look to join the South Congress Makers Market.

"All the vendors have become very close," Mumford said. "We have a lot of people who seek us out, and we're here."

Sawyer explained that he's known many vendors for years, and this adds to the energy that these markets provide. Even though the market is smaller, many vendors return to this event.

"My wife and I are involved in the community," Sawyer said. "Some folks have just come out to go for the first time, but as I look around, most of these people I've known five, six, seven, eight years out here are doing this."

Markets like these also help to create a space where local artists are able to share their handmade goods. This also brings together the surrounding community.

"Something different and locally made will tend to be unique to the artist which becomes more personal to the person," Sawyer said "It is a symbol between us and big business."

According to Sawyer, South Congress has an energy that makes the market enjoyable for everyone. In his opinion, this allows people to be able to share ideas and come together, making the creative community stronger.

"The community [created] by sharing their art and ideas tends to be fun," Sawyer said. "It's rare that someone will come out to South Congress and be in a bad mood because you're in a pretty good space."

The South Congress Makers Market takes place every Friday and Saturday from 10 a.m. - 5 p.m. and Sunday from 1:30 - 5 p.m. next to the church on South Congress. They also have a virtual market where anyone can shop at any time.



THE COMPLETED PIECE An organizational line drawing, gestures, and value study piece that were done by students in art 1 sits on display at LASA. LASA students have the opportunity to both showcase their art and explore their creativity. photo by Ellington Tough

Austin Museum Day Has Major Turnout

JACK ZIPFEL | staff writer

Museums across Austin buzzed with activity as residents gathered to celebrate culture, history, and art during 2025's Austin Museum Day. According to the Austin Museum Partnership's website, the annual event is designed to make culture more accessible while highlighting local creative institutions.

Organized by the Austin Museum Partnership (AMP), the event brings together museums of all sizes for a citywide celebration on the second-to-last Sunday of every month. Catherine Whited, the co-chair of AMP, explained that the event draws attention to Austin's cultural richness while simplifying access.

"Austin Museum Day is an opportunity for us to get the eyes of the local community on the museums in the city to remind them that, yes, we have so many museums here," Whited said. "By hosting one day where all of the museums are free, it really breaks down those barriers to entry."

For smaller institutions, the difference that free admission makes can have dramatic effects. Whited also works for Landmarks, the public art program at the University of Texas at Austin, and she described the turnout at their public art tours.

"On Austin Museum Day last year, we had 136 people show up," Whited said. "That's a huge increase from the twelve or so people who usually come to our monthly tours."

Though important, the event is more than just the numbers. For many museums, such as Landmarks, it's a chance to connect with audiences who might have otherwise never stepped through their doors.

"It's a way to remind people that even the smallest museums in Austin are worth visiting," Whited said. "Many visitors are surprised by what they find."

One of the participating sites is Pioneer Farms, a 100-acre living history museum in Northeast Austin. Michael Ward, the CEO of Pioneer Farms, described how the event allows guests to experience Texas history in an immersive way.

"It gives several thousand people in Austin a chance to reach out and touch, see, smell, and experience Texas history," Ward said. "If you like living history, you'll love Pioneer Farms."

The surge in attendance during this event is striking compared to a typical weekend, according to Ward. The large crowds showcase the impact Austin Museum Day has in attracting visitors who might not normally explore these cultural sites.

"On Austin Museum Day, we usually see somewhere between

1,200 to 1,500 people," Ward said. "Sometimes we've had as much as 2,000 on a really nice fall day. On an average weekend, two or three hundred people come out."

Ward mentioned that first-time guests often leave with a deeper appreciation for the state's past. This new interest can then translate into return trips, strengthening the connection between museums and the broader community.

"I hope they learn something about Texas history," Ward said. "Texas has one of the most colorful and storied histories of any state. It's different from anything else."

The Blanton Museum of Art, one of the largest art museums in Central Texas, also welcomed crowds during Austin Museum Day. Katie Bruton, the museum's Public Relations and Media Manager, spoke about how the day helps strengthen community ties.

"Participating in Austin Museum Day has always been a great experience as we aim to make the museum welcoming and accessible to our local visitors," Bruton said. "It's also a way to celebrate the breadth of museums and cultural organizations in Austin and the surrounding area."

Bruton noted that attendance surged well beyond normal numbers in one single day. The response reflects the museum's role in the city and the importance of this day for museums.

"This year, we saw almost 8,000 visitors on Austin Museum Day—which is amazing," Bruton said. "This is almost double our average weekly attendance."

Whited talked about how events like this one help museums of all scales build lasting relationships with the community. She explained that the event encourages repeat visits and long-term engagement, ensuring that museums remain active parts of Austin's cultural life beyond a single day of free admission.

"My goal would be for Austin Museum Day to actually involve every museum across the city," Whited said. "We've talked about what if there were multiple museum days, or even a pass from the library that people could check out to get into museums for free."

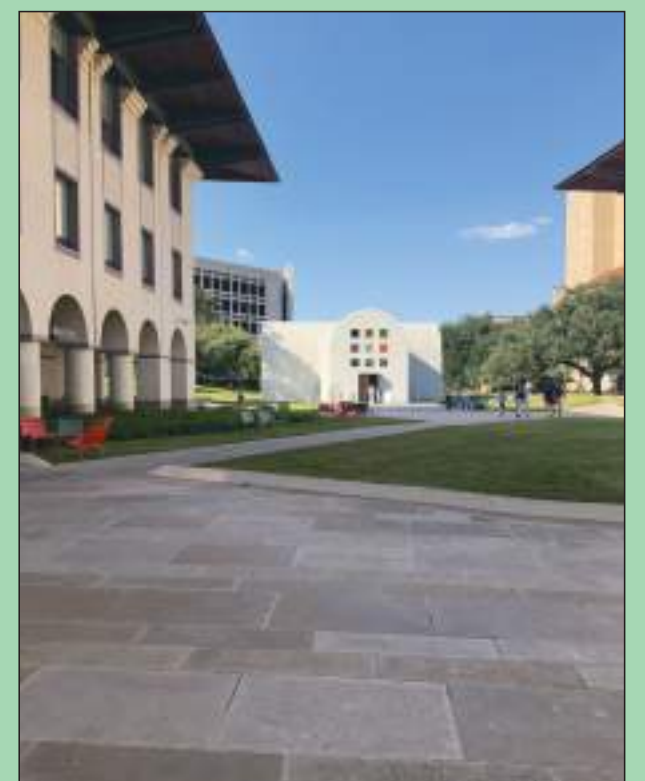
Pioneer Farms uses the day to showcase its other fall events, including the Pumpkin Nights Festival and the museum's folk art school, which offers classes in skills such as blacksmithing, woodworking, and traditional crafts. Ward added that the focus, however, remains on outreach.

"It gives more people the opportunity to visit museums who might not otherwise be familiar with them or be able to pay attendance fees," Ward said. "And the more people who can

experience history will appreciate history."

Austin Museum Day continues to grow each year, with organizers and participants envisioning even greater reach in the future. For now, the event remains day-long and is set aside for exploring the city's history, culture, and art: all free of charge.

"It's a large crowd, and if we were charging admission, we could make some money, but that's not the point," Ward said. "The point is to bring people out."



THE COURTYARD The Blanton art museum shines in the sun the day after Austin Museum Day. It is a space where museum-goers are able to go throughout the day. photo by Lily Antony

Hot Sauce Turns up the Heat at Austin Festival

MAURICIO RODRIGUEZ | staff writer

With vibrant colors, fiery sauces, and interesting flavors, the Austin Chronicle Hot Sauce Festival is a spice enthusiast's dream. Competition is fierce among local hot sauce makers vying for the crown.

The Hot Sauce Festival is a local event hosted by the Austin Chronicle every year since 1990. It brings together hot sauce, competition, and music. Attendees can vote for their favorite sauces to be awarded the People's Choice Award, and proceeds from the festival go to the Central Texas Food Bank. LASA senior Maddie Davis spoke about her experience going to the festival for the first time this year.

"I heard about the festival from my friends who were already going," Davis said. "Originally I wanted to go just to hang out with my friends, but once I won a free Schlotzsky's hat and got around to trying the hot sauces, I decided I was there for the hot sauces too."

Jon Sheldon, the co-owner of a hot sauce company called Freaky Ferments, explained that he was prepared to compete. Every weekend, he and his fellow enthusiasts try out new recipes, so he has a prior passion for hot sauce.

"It is an absolute blast to share our work and passion with like-minded people who love hot sauce and spicy food," Sheldon said. "It's incredibly rewarding to have people try our sauces."

The festival offers a unique Austin experience for many people, like Cesar Rodriguez. Rodriguez is an award-winning hot sauce maker at the Austin Chronicle Hot Sauce Festival.

"The fact that I was sweating in the summer, eating hot stuff," Rodriguez said. "Yet still finding a way to enjoy Austin's brutal summer is what Austin is all about to me."

The aim of the festival is to find the best hot sauce in Austin, with voting from both judges and the people. However, for Sheldon, the true value of the hot sauce festival is not the accolades, but the joy of sharing his hot sauce with others.

"The responses to our sauces were overwhelmingly positive,"

Sheldon said. "Having someone seek you out because they are excited and interested in what you are doing is far more important to us than a ribbon. Having someone light up at the booth, excited to try our sauces and decide to add them to their daily meals, is more rewarding than a bronze pepper paperweight."

According to Cassie Arredondo, the lead producer of the Hot Sauce Festival, the event has gone through some drastic changes due to many outside variables. Although the festival has changed over the years, Arredondo and her team do their best to keep the festival as true to the original as they can.

"We've worked hard to maintain the spirit of the original event while adjusting the format to be more sustainable, both financially and logistically," Arredondo said. "That meant a mix of rethinking the venue, the ticketing model, and how we engage with both attendees and longtime partners like the Central Texas Food Bank."

At the festival, Sheldon finds that the Austin Chronicle Hot Sauce Festival is more than just an annual event. To him, it's a community of hot sauce aficionados coming together to create something bigger than themselves.

"Hot sauce is definitely something that brings people together," Sheldon said. "Finding a home, finding a community, and finding common ground are essential for a functioning society to grow and last. So why not build it on the love of hot sauce? And Austin is definitely weird enough for it to work there. I don't see the festival going anywhere except bigger and better. We love being there, and others do too."

In the future, according to Arredondo, the festival will remain a unique part of the Austin community. But it also has room to improve and become an increasingly sustainable event for The Austin Chronicle to put on.

"I hope the festival continues to grow while staying true to its roots by giving back to the community," said Arredondo. "Supporting local businesses, and celebrating the hot sauce makers that look forward to bringing the heat to Austin every year."

Sheldon is adamant about hot sauce lovers, both new and old, joining the community. Although the competition is daunting, the

festival is a place for both newcomers and veterans alike to come together, create a community, and enjoy spicy food, according to Sheldon.

"I highly encourage others to participate," Sheldon said. "It is an absolute blast! Whether you are just a fan of spicy foods or a hot sauce company, the Austin Chronicle is a fantastic way to try something new and meet like-minded people."



TRYING IT OUT Attendees of the Austin Chronicle Hot Sauce Festival going to the various booths. Booth attendants give out samples to the attendees. photos by Lily Antony

How LASA Students Listen to Music

DAVID PODBIELSKI | staff writer

With smartphones banned and Spotify blocked on school-issued devices, students are forced to adapt. Texas House Bill 1481 stated that if the device has any wireless communication abilities, it cannot be used during school hours. Students are limited to handheld, wired devices. While some music-loving students use small MP3 players, such as the Apple iPod, others have taken inspiration from their parents by bringing CD players or even the iconic Walkman to school.



Local Artist Highlight: Thomas Chapman

MARCUS BALYAKINA-HERRERA | staff writer

Throughout Austin, there are an innumerable amount of musicians, ranging from indie to bluegrass with every genre you can think of. One of the many hip-hop musicians in Austin is Thomas Chapman, also known as Smackola, who has created many projects throughout his career.

Chapman has a long history of being involved with music, as he has written poetry and rapped since the third grade. Eventually, he moved to Austin from California in the early 2000s to create rap and rock music, as well as DJ across the city. He created his band, the Dirty Wormz, in 2001, a hip-hop-infused rock band. Dirty Wormz is a hip-hop-infused group that also consists of the members Tech N9ne and Krizz Kaliko.

"I started off young as a DJ, and then I was a rapper," Chapman said. "The rapping was taking off more, so I went with the rapping because it was stronger, and I put the DJing to the side. Then I had the Dirty Wormz, and that took off."

Later, Chapman would decide to return to DJ'ing and become a stronger solo artist. This allowed him to explore outside of his band and reconnect with his roots.

"It gave me another life outside of just being the guy from the band Dirty Wormz," Chapman said. "The Dirty Wormz are great, but there was so much more I could do."

Chapman said being a part of a band is both difficult and enjoyable as many people struggle to find their place and the motivation to continue their work. He also stated that motivation largely determines the outcome and reward within the music industry.

"My hustle was different, so people weren't really hustling like that. I think that because I was doing that, my work ethic was just different, I was just more like 'let's get it done today,'" Chapman said. "If someone is like 'hey, we have a show next Saturday', in the next two hours I'm going to have a flyer and everything already ready to go."

Chapman described some differences between the music scene he knew and the music scene he is witnessing now. According to him, the experience of supporting local bands has been reworked and has become less involved for the community.

"Well when I was out here, it was more about buying tickets to go see a band you liked or your friends invited you out," Chapman said. "This was before social media, and streaming so you had to go see it. You might have seen a clip back then, but you would still have to actually go see it, now everyone is streaming online so you may have already seen the whole show."

"It gave me another life outside of just being the guy from the band Dirty Wormz. The Dirty Wormz are great, but there was so much more I could do."

- THOMAS CHAPMAN, AKA SMACKOLA

Chapman mentioned that social media and short-form videos have greatly changed how bands create their music and content. Now, there are many areas of the creative process and songs that matter more, like a chorus that sticks, and others that matter less, like the verses of the song.

"I think it makes it a bit harder for people to commit to what they're doing in the scene. Because of how easily forgettable content online is," Chapman said. "With the new age of media as well, it makes it harder for people to tell who you really are from your music, because of editing and small clips, instead of fully paying attention to the song."

Chapman shared how he used to sell merch at all of his shows and that he plans to make an album that is only available on vinyl. He stated that he believes in fully supporting a band rather than listening to their music through streaming. According to him, buying physical copies makes the music more meaningful.

"I want them to have a good time with my work. I want them to enjoy the journey of it," Chapman said. "They've seen it when they were young, and now they can see it all grown up. That's what I like the most, I'll run into people all the time, and they will mention how they saw me when they were in high school, and that I inspired them to make a band. That's what's most important to me, is that they were inspired to make their own work."

Chapman thinks that if you want to be involved with music, then you just need to go ahead and start. Especially since the influx of musicians and artists in Austin makes it intimidating to want to join the local scene.

"I think if you're a musician at heart and that's what you want to do then you should do it," Chapman said. "Because, you know, it's fun, right?"

Chapman plans on continuing to do shows with Dirty Wormz. He is also working on a comic show called "The Vinyl Vendetta." These works can be found online through Facebook, or Instagram. Every Thursday in Kyle, he DJs at the Railhouse, and every Friday, he DJs at Third Base in Round Rock.

Silent Disco Takeover

CLEMENTINE DAVIS | staff writer

At a silent disco, the room may be quiet, but the dance floor is alive. Dozens of people twirl around in near silence, each lost in their own world of music of their choosing. Behind the oversized headphones and flashing lights lies something bigger—a celebration of inclusivity where everyone, no matter their sensory needs, can enjoy the dancefloor. Silent discos have taken place at Austin City Limits, on cruise ships, and even at the most elaborate birthday parties. For people who are hard of hearing, sensitive to loud noises, or neurodivergent, it is so much more than just some headphones and a DJ.

One of the biggest attractions of silent disco is the lowered volume, according to DJ Cory Baum, who frequently DJs B'nai Mitzvahs, a coming-of-age celebration for Jewish children. Without any music blaring through speakers, Baum noticed that it had become a common option to increase accessibility at loud events, and he noticed a huge rise in silent disco popularity since the COVID-19 pandemic.

"It started out as a way to accommodate needs," Baum said. "We had one kiddo do [silent disco], and she had sensory issues and was partially deaf. The loud noises really gave her headaches, and so we were able to integrate that into the party."

For 14-year-old Jace Chen, who is easily overwhelmed by lots of noise, sound accommodations can be a really important factor in determining his comfort levels at a party. He explained that he once tried silent disco on a cruise ship, and he found the atmosphere very enjoyable.

"I think the reduced noise level of a silent disco really does help me feel more comfortable and safe," Chen said. "I can't speak for everyone, but I definitely had a good time, and I think from what I saw, other people did have fun as well."

While it started out as an option for accessibility, Baum has noticed silent discos becoming something everybody loves to participate in. He stated that it is helpful when a party has a wide range of people since it allows participants to curate the music they want to listen to through their own headphones.

"When there's music coming out of the speakers, you have one option, but when it's coming out of the headphones, you have three options," Baum said. "What's also really cool is that people make requests, and if I get one for a slow song, or an old person song, typically you'll lose the kids from the dance floor ... With silent disco, you can really provide the experience for each person, and they don't have to leave the dance floor; they can still stay there and celebrate."

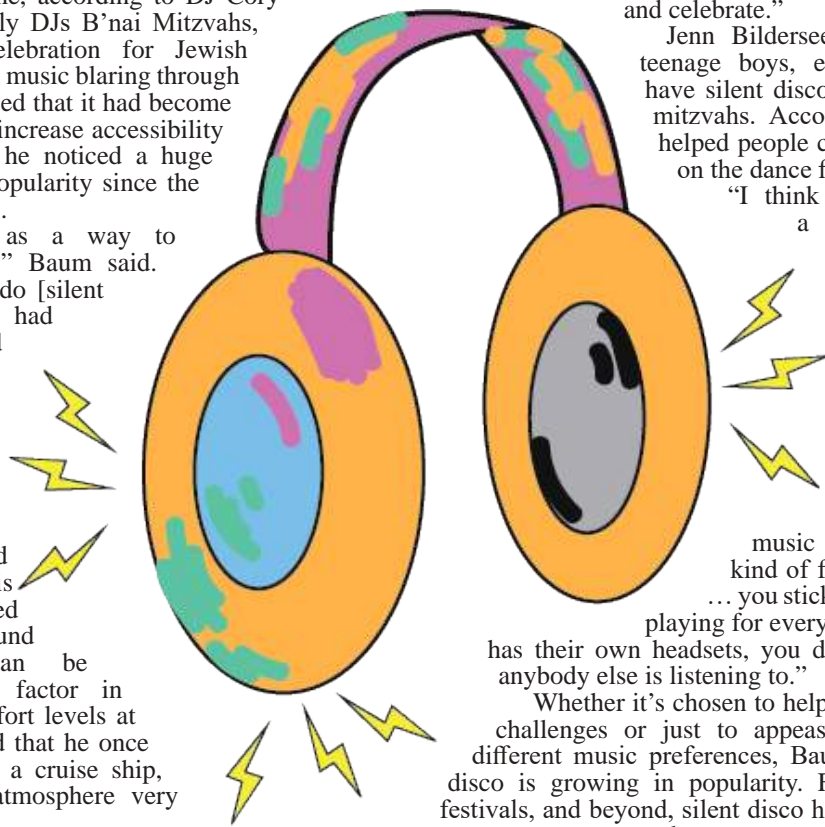
Jenn Bildersee, the mother of two teenage boys, ended up choosing to have silent discos for both of their bar mitzvahs. According to her, it really helped people come out of their shells on the dance floor.

"I think that people who are a little shy or even have social anxiety and don't feel comfortable dancing in front of other people feel more comfortable dancing with silent disco," Bildersee said. "I think if everybody's listening to the same music and you're dancing kind of funny or off the rhythm ... you stick out if it's just one song playing for everybody. But if everybody has their own headsets, you don't really know what anybody else is listening to."

Whether it's chosen to help out people with social challenges or just to appease groups with wildly different music preferences, Baum believes that silent disco is growing in popularity. From parties to music festivals, and beyond, silent disco has taken off throughout states, age ranges, and event genres.

"[Silent disco] gets brought up in situations where you might have a neurodivergent kid," Baum said. "But it really shifted into this experience where everyone feels like they can listen to what they want to listen to."

graphic by Tim Cao



Editor's Picks
Best Halloween Movie
The Nightmare Before Christmas

GEORGIA FINK | entertainment editor

Although I am not a Halloween movie fanatic, one of my favorite movies to watch during the Halloween season is "The Nightmare Before Christmas". Combining appealing stop motion animation and a creative idea to make a new and interesting story, it is a must-see Halloween watch. My favorite aspect of the movie, though, has to be the songs. Danny Elfman seamlessly blends together music with the Halloween spirit, allowing the movie to keep a spooky (but not scary) feeling. It is also perfect for those who want to get into the Christmas spirit right away, as Christmas is a major plot point throughout the movie. Thus, The Nightmare Before Christmas is one of the best choices for anyone to watch on Halloween.

Beetlejuice

ABBEY WU | entertainment editor

When October rolls around, I'm always desperate to get into the fall spirit. I just love all of the typical fall activities: pumpkin carving, baking assorted pumpkin desserts, and putting up Halloween decorations. Nothing beats the nostalgic feeling of curling up under a warm blanket and putting on a Halloween movie. My go-to isn't some horror classic or monster flick, it's "Beetlejuice". There's something about the way it makes the absurd entertaining that's so captivating. The movie's universe is packed full of amusement. From ghosts with ridiculous personalities to an afterlife filled with long lines and paperwork to a slightly insane "bio-exorcist" who is both hilarious and terrifying, there is never a dull moment in the film. Tim Burton's gothic but cheerful style makes each scene feel like you've stepped into Halloween, with a vibe that's just a little bit strange. Unlike other seasonal films, Beetlejuice never tries too hard to scare. Instead, it leans into the fun side of the fall holiday. Every year, when I watch it, I notice new little details about the oddly intriguing set or uncover new layers of dark humor in the dialogue. It's the perfect mix of spooky and comedic, never taking itself too seriously. To me, "Beetlejuice" is the kind of film that reminds you that Halloween is meant to be weird, funny, and a little bit chaotic, which is exactly why it's the best.

Hocus Pocus

ETHAN STERN | copy and managing editor

In another life, where I was born in the mid-1980s, I would walk with my friends one summer night to the movie theaters on a Friday, on July 16, 1993, to be exact, and I would buy candy and popcorn and watch "Hocus Pocus". It would be summer break, and I would walk out dissatisfied after watching what could possibly be the biggest flop of a movie. "I'm not even in the Halloween mood," I would say, and "Jurassic Park" takes the summer blockbuster spot anyway," my friends would add. I would want my 90 minutes and 4 dollars back. However, I am not that Ethan. To present-day Ethan, "Hocus Pocus" is not a flop, but rather the inarguable, indisputable, incontestable beyond doubt, unquestionably best Halloween movie on the planet. Hocus Pocus originally came out early so as not to be overshadowed by "The Nightmare Before Christmas", yet it was, to critics and viewers, a mess. But with consistent showings, it has inserted itself into so many Halloween traditions. Other than just a classic comfort watch, it's a marker of a different time period. A time when kids could go and face these ridiculous problems as long as they were home by the time their parents checked on them. In Max Dennison's case, when they were back from their adult party, and probably after the drinks wore off. From the outlandish plot to the immensely funny characters to the writing, this movie is pure comedy gold. However, other than just being enchanting with its humor, the somewhat historical backdrop behind the movie makes it even more entertaining. The Salem Witch Trials are featured in their 2022 sequel (30 years later and still magical, I know). Set against a nostalgic '90s backdrop and a star-studded cast, including Bette Midler, Sarah Jessica Parker, and Kathy Najimy as the witches, the movie cemented itself as a Halloween favorite.

Public Library Programming

ELINA SARKAR | staff writer

In 2023, over 4 million items were checked out of the Austin Public Library, according to the city's data service. The number includes books, music, laptops, and more, showcasing that the Austin Public Library has become a crucial resource and a staple destination for residents of the Austin area.

Austin Public Library (APL) has 22 branches across Austin. Any student in the Austin Independent School District is able to get a library card and access its collections. In addition to its vast selection of books, APL provides many events and services at no cost. It hosts cooking classes, loans tools, and renews passports. At the library, users can check out STEM kits for their children or take home plant seeds. These opportunities, along with the many other activities that APL has to offer, allow for a community to grow. Susan Nyfeler, a youth services librarian at the Central Branch, discussed the partnership between the community and the library.

"My absolute favorite part of the library is that it belongs to everyone," Nyfeler said. "Everybody here is looking to listen to the community, reach out into the community, hear what people want."

According to Nyfeler, the feedback helps to shape the way APL interacts with its visitors. Through this feedback, she acknowledges how the library's role in the community has changed over the years.

"We are always trying to fulfill the information needs for our customers, and that doesn't always look the same," Nyfeler said. "In the past, it was [just] books. Now it's books, experiences, collaboration, community partnerships."

Kathleen Houlihan, one of the Teen Central librarians in a section of the Austin Central Library reserved for teenagers, discussed the many opportunities for youth at APL. She noted that at the Central Library, the staff lets teenagers take a leading role in the Teen Center programming.

"We shifted to that model where our teens are sort of in the driver's seat," Houlihan said. "We are there to support, to go and get stuff, and do the purchasing and help them do the planning."



TO THE LIBRARY An activity area in Teen Central, a space that is part of the Austin Central Library. This is a space where teens are able to work on homework, play games, do crafts, and much more. photo by Lily Antony

According to Nyfeler, APL has programs to support artists and authors of all ages. It specifically aims to feature Austinites and promote their work to the community.

"We have an art gallery here, and we'll partner with local artists on programs and on their art display," Nyfeler said. "We will work with local musicians, artists, storytellers to provide programs for children and teens."

The way that programming is done is also reflected in the LASA library through events and available activities. LASA librarian Elizabeth Switek reflected on the ways library programming brings people together.

"There's all of the programming that libraries do where kids can come together or teens can come together or adults over board game nights, kids over book clubs, little kids, toddler story times, things like that," Switek said. "They're all the ways that you can build community."

According to Jenny Sirrat, the school partnerships librarian, APL keeps all audiences in mind when creating its programs. They provide various resources and put together events that promote different cultures in the Austin area.

"For a while there was a Ukrainian story time," Sirrat said. "[We also have] books that were originally published in Spanish, from Latin American authors."

The Austin Public Library's mission statement is to "inspire all to discover, learn, and create." According to Nyfeler, the APL team is constantly adapting to fulfill this goal.

"The library is a living organism," Nyfeler said. "We don't stay put. We are constantly. We are never perfect at this, everybody here is looking to listen to the community, reach out into the community, and hear what people want."



UP, UP, UP The Austin Central Library showcases its incredible architecture. photo by Lily Antony

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graphic by Georgia Fink

Roller Derby Scene in Austin

VIOLET ZITKOVIC | staff writer

The arena is deafening. For the fans in the crowd, the screaming and excitement overwhelm their ears. The players in the rink, though, only hear the whirring of roller skates against the floor as they plot their way through the waves of opposing skaters. The pace is blinding, the scoring is high. This is roller derby, played at thousands of locations across the nation and beyond.

Roller derby in its most current iteration is incredibly young by sports standards, only appearing in the early 2000s. Roller skating sports have been a phenomenon for a while — since roller skates were invented — including forms of roller derby. However, the newest iteration is very different as it focuses on feminine identity, rebellion, and community through the inclusion of diverse communities like the LGBTQ+. Players race at high speeds around a track, with a “jammer” trying to score points by winding around the opposing team’s “blockers.” Since its beginnings in Austin in 2001, roller derby has become a nationwide phenomenon.

Austin Roller Derby (Austin RD) is a major Austin-based derby organization composed of six teams with both mixed gender and all-women’s teams containing a range of competition levels. The Texas Roller Girls is another women’s flat track roller derby league founded in Austin. Katrina Whitehair, also known as “Kat Trix,” and Kelly McNeil, or “Kelarella de Vil,” are the president and vice president of Austin RD. They discussed the specific connection of roller derby to Austin.

“It started here in Austin, Texas, the rebirth in the nation in the early 2000s was here in 2001 with Texas Roller Derby,” Whitehair said. “And then shortly after, Texas Roller Girls started in 2003. There’s more Derby in Austin than most places in the country.”

Both Whitehair and McNeil began playing derby in 2010. Although McNeil started in California, and Whitehair in Kentucky, McNeil described Austin as the “Mecca” of roller derby.



graphic by Asher Zvi-Nova

“I started in Louisville, Kentucky, in 2010 with Derby City Roller Girls,” Whitehair said. “I moved to New York City in 2012,

and around 2013, 2014, I joined Gotham Roller Derby and started doing their basic training program. The years that I was there, the All Stars at Gotham were number one, number two, number three in the world ... they had a huge league. There were 120 skaters when I was there.”

Whitehair ended up moving to Texas in the late 2010s, after leaving the sport. She eventually found herself in the birthplace of modern derby, and she was drawn right back into the sport.

After COVID here in Austin, I just hadn’t had enough, so I came back four years later in 2021, and the rest is history,” Whitehair said. “I’ve always come back to derby.”

McNeil has experienced a very different story and has started from much smaller leagues on the other side of the country. However, she still found a place for herself in roller derby and in Austin.

“I started in Merced, California, with the Rollin’ Roulettes,” McNeil said. “Early times, very small league, I think, at the very max height of it, we had 50 people ... I got recruited just because I was kind of like a riot girl, punk rock girl ... and little did they know that I was also an athlete. It was also a really good fit for me because I believed in, you know, kind of the shenanigans of Riot Grrrl, protest and activism, but also I am very competitive.”

Austin Roller Derby teams are numerous and varied. Their top travel team is known as the Greatest Hits, and they are the team that Whitehair plays for. However, according to rankings from Women’s Flat Track Derby Association, the Texecutioners, who are the travel team for the Texas Roller Girls, are the top-ranked one in the South. Austin Anarchy is another prominent Austin group, currently operating as an open-gender league with multiple home teams and a travel team. The Austin Free Radicals, McNeil’s team, is a more casual scrimmage pickup team that plays mostly within Central Texas.

“We go to San Antonio, we go to wherever they invite us, pretty much,” McNeil said. “Because it’s a scrimmage pickup team, we never really know who’s going to play.”

Alongside the usual flat-track roller derby, there is also banked-track roller derby, which involves a much higher-speed, tilted track. While the changes are small, the culture is entirely different. The higher amounts of upkeep required usually result in for-profit organizations surrounding it, which contrasts with the usually non-profit flat-track.

“Banked track is definitely more in the entertainment field, although it is competitive,” McNeil said. “The easiest way to make the comparison is like professional wrestling, like Wrestlemania, you know, where it’s very theatrical, but the physical competitiveness is still present. However, the goal is to entertain because, again, you’re bringing in folks, and so you’re having a show.”

While the competitive aspects can be important to people like McNeil, roller derby is also notable for the community

and growth it can foster in people. From its beginnings as an inclusive, diverse sport, this has been a key goal of the new wave of roller derby.

“Roller derby saved my life,” Whitehair said. “Adulthood is hard, moving to a new city is hard, making friends is hard, staying in shape is hard, and roller derby is that outlet. You build community, you make lifelong friends, you compete physically. It’s mentally challenging. It checks all the boxes to create the lifestyle that I enjoy, and it’s had a huge impact on who I am as an individual in the world. I would not be who I am without it.”

From preteens to people in their fifties, people across all ages have found a community in roller derby. LASA alum Karter Henkelman began playing roller derby in an Austin youth league during his junior year. He has continued that passion while attending college in Canada.

“I was one of the oldest, but it’s like just an amazing community of people,” Henkelman said. “My travel team that went all around the U.S. There were 18 of us, ranging from ages 12 to 18. Most of them were 13 or 14. It was such an amazing community for me to be a part of. Everyone was so accepting and kind in a way that I had never seen before. And it was good to see people that were like me in it. It was an amazing community, and it still is.”

Henkelman highlighted that roller derby can be challenging to get into. However, those who have experienced it say that the benefits far outweigh the costs.

“The hardest part, I think, is actually learning to skate, just because the learning curve is so steep,” Henkelman said. “You get there and you’ve never skated before, and suddenly you have to hit people on wheels, which is really scary at first. You get hurt a lot in the beginning, especially when you don’t know how to fall and how to do all these things. But I didn’t have a lot of social challenges. It was just mainly actually learning how to play and how to play well and safely.”

As the sport keeps on growing and changing, Roller Derby continues to push sports boundaries. On both the competitive and casual levels, a new generation of derby players is sure to be welcome.

“It’s really terrifying at first, and there’s so many rules,” Henkelman said. “And there are these people, they look so cool, and you’re like, wow, I don’t feel like I can talk to them or do something that’s that cool, but it’ll be okay. Just do it.”

opinion Is the MLS Serious Now?

ZACHARY EGLER | staff writer

When Major League Soccer (MLS) launched in 1996, it was a gamble. The U.S. had already tried professional soccer with the North American Soccer League (NASL) and watched it collapse. In 1996, when MLS first started, it seemed just as risky, with only a handful of investors keeping it afloat. Fast-forward to now, and the league is unrecognizable. Clubs are worth billions, star players sign from all over the world to play in the MLS, and fan attendance is way up, bringing one question to the forefront: has American soccer finally arrived?

Financially, MLS is thriving, and it is as legitimate as any other American sports league. Team values have risen, broadcasting revenue continues to pour in, expansion fees — which is the price you need to pay to buy a team — continue to rise, and new stadiums continue to open. Of the top 30 most valuable soccer clubs in the world, eight of them are from MLS, a tally second only to England’s Premier League. That only goes to show that the league has built a sustainable machine.

On the field, however, the MLS is competitive but limited.

The league’s rules are built to keep clubs evenly matched in talent. Salary caps, roster limits, and a few spots for high-priced stars prevent any one team from pulling away as being a clear best. This makes games within the league unpredictable but also prevents clubs from building a super-team to compete in Europe.

The transfer market shows both progress and limits. Spending in the league is way up. Clubs are bringing in younger international players instead of relying solely on aging stars. This shows the growing popularity of the league as more players are moving to MLS.

Then there’s the true source of the issue: what exactly does MLS want to be? It has borrowed from most of American sports culture with franchises instead of clubs, stability over chaos, and parity over dominance. This model has helped maintain its relevance and growth, but soccer is a global game with different expectations. Around the world, the drama comes from the risk of failure and the freedom to spend big. Promotion and regulation drive passion and decision-making in most major soccer nations. MLS has stayed away from that game.

This is where MLS needs to answer whether it should lean further into the American model or open itself to the global model and loosen its restrictions. If they lean into the American model, they would have to hope stability and gradual growth eventually add up to something bigger. If they opt for the global model, they would allow clubs to chase glory, even at the risk of increasing the gap between the teams at the top and the bottom of the league.

The MLS is financially strong, culturally relevant, and more respected globally than anyone could have ever imagined. Does that mean it has reached its peak? Absolutely not. 30 years since its creation, the league has proven it belongs. However, belonging and leading are not the same thing.

Where the MLS goes will be defined by its own ambition. If the MLS stays cautious, it will remain solid, but never first. It will be a good league that won’t ever be considered top-tier. If it gambles, the resources and fan base are already there to push it into that upper echelon of the global elite.

MLS has proven it can last. Now it has to prove how far it can go.

Introduction to F1 Academy

PHOENIX GEROME | staff writer

Over recent years, many more women have begun racing cars, specifically in the Formula 1 (F1) academy and Indy NXT. There are mixed reactions to the new addition to the sport. Some enjoy it and think it will be beneficial for F1, while others may not agree with women starting to race in F1.

The F1 Academy is an all-female series launched in 2023 to promote advancements for women in higher-level racing, such as F3, F2, or possibly even F1. In the current 2025 season, 18 women are racing in the F1 Academy. It is designed to help increase female participation in the male-dominated sport. However, racers in F1 Academy are only allowed to race for two seasons to allow for more racers to join the series.

Michelle Barron is a female race car driver and F1 enthusiast. She believes that women should have the same opportunities as men in F1.

“Women should and do have the opportunity to compete at the F1 level,” Barron said. “However, historically, there has been less interest in investing in women than their male counterparts. I think it has been much harder for a woman to prove herself and get the sponsorship needed to be able to focus on training, et cetera. It is an extremely expensive sport.”

On May 28, a show named F1: The Academy was released on Netflix for F1 enthusiasts to watch. The show featured female racers who are currently participating in the F1 Academy, showcasing not only drivers’ highlights but also their background and motives. It is meant to inspire women and show what they can do in the sport to help shift perceptions and viewpoints.

Despite efforts to increase female participation, the last female F1 racer to enter a race was Giovanna Amati in 1992. Besides F1 and the F1 Academy, there are two female racers in the Indy NXT series and one female racing in NASCAR currently, Miles Dille, an Austin High freshman, enjoys F1 and has attended many races.

“I think they will [race soon], maybe like a decade, maybe more, because there’s not any in the higher rookie series right now, but there’s a driver in IndyCar and Nascar who is a girl,” Dille said.

Although there aren’t expected to be any female F1 racers this year, the F1 Academy is working hard to try to incorporate women into professional racing. Leonardo Offenber, an F1 and car enthusiast who loves watching motorsports, spoke about his perspective on the F1 community.

“It’ll [Formula 1] gain not just more fans but it’ll also form more respect and a better public view on F1, and knowing that it’s a good community and that it’s friendly to all,” Offenber said.

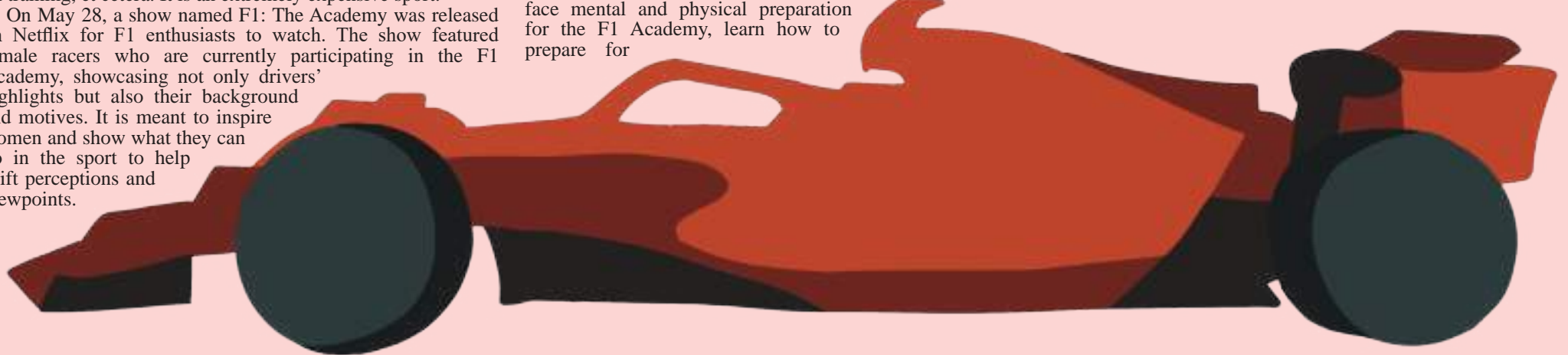
In order to race in the F1 Academy, racers must undergo extensive training in and out of the Driver-in-Loop simulator, which replicates real F1 cars with realistic physics to help ensure a realistic racing experience. The racers also face mental and physical preparation for the F1 Academy, learn how to prepare for

interviews, engage with fans, and learn how to build their public profile.

Drivers face high-speed G-forces, rapid deceleration, and extreme temperatures inside the cockpit. The demands of controlling a car for nearly two hours at 200 mph while maintaining precise concentration and reflexes require a unique blend of strength, endurance, and flexibility, according to V12 Retail Solutions. To face these challenges, racers must master the braking points and be able to control their vehicle in various weather conditions.

“I think the biggest misconception is that women are not as physically capable and/or mentally more self-preserving than men,” Barron said. “There are clearly many women who possess high-level competitiveness in both. I think F1 recognizes that. Physical differences become less immaterial for driving than in other sports; however, training includes a lot of physical strength and endurance. I don’t think the rules should be changed to qualify. Women are physically capable.”

Although it may take some time, many are excited for the inclusion of women in the sport. The addition of female racers could inspire racers and continue to expand access to the sport for future generations.



graphic by Tita Gonzalez

opinion

MMA Makes Waves

PRATIK GURIJALA | sports editor

The lights go down and two fighters step into the octagon. The crowd is buzzing, the tension is thick. When the fight starts, it is nothing but nonstop action. This is mixed martial arts, also known as MMA. Over the last decade, it has grown from a sport only a few people watched to one of the most popular and exciting sports in the world. With the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) leading the charge, MMA is gaining more fans every year.

One of the biggest reasons why MMA is so popular is that it combines so many different fighting styles. The mix of action, skill, and global appeal gives it the potential to become one of the greatest sports of our time. You see everything all at once, such as punches from boxing, grappling from judo, and downs from wrestling. A fighter could be throwing kicks one second, choking their opponent in the next, and then defending a takedown right after. Every fight is unpredictable.

The variety in the sport allows fighters to come from all sorts of backgrounds, anything from a wrestling and grappling background or a boxing and striking background. Furthermore, martial arts in general come from all over the world: karate from Japan, jiu-jitsu from Brazil, and wrestling from Russia. MMA brings all of those together. Fighters come from every part of the world, and fans can watch international stars face off in the octagon. That worldwide reach is what makes soccer so big, and MMA has that same potential to connect people from everywhere.

It's not just the fights themselves — it is the athletes. MMA fighters are not just strong or fast, but they also have to be good at everything: the strength to wrestle; the stamina to fight for a whole 25 minutes nonstop; the quickness and agility to dodge punches; and the mental focus to make split-second decisions that decide the outcome of the match. Think about someone like Amanda Nunes, who has knockout power and high-level grappling. It shows that to succeed in MMA, you can not just be great at one thing, but have to be well-rounded.

Sports betting has also played a role in the popularity of MMA. Every MMA fight has so many possible outcomes. Will it end in a knockout, a submission, or a decision? Will the underdog pull off a huge upset? This unpredictability during the fight is what makes MMA so exciting. While betting is not the main reason the sport has gotten so popular, it definitely adds

to the attention and gets more people invested in watching the fights.

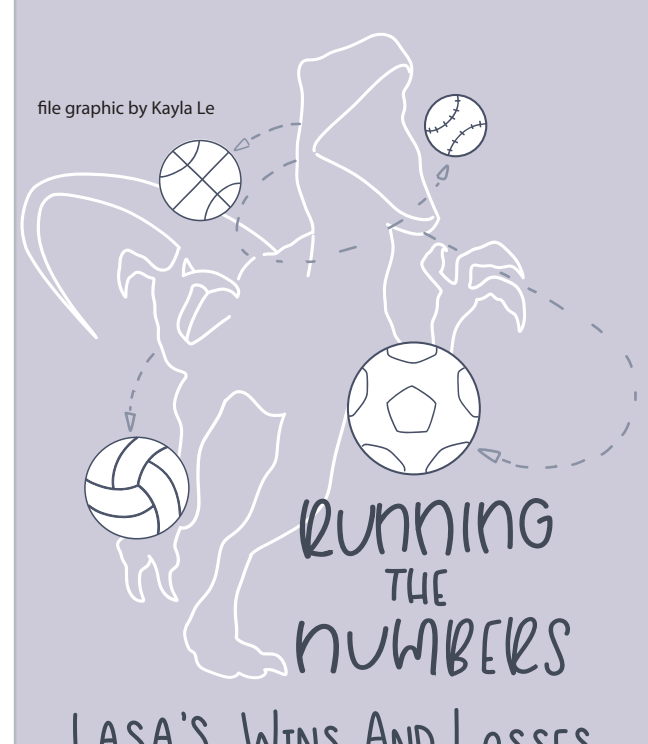
The speed and pace of MMA also make it different from other sports. Baseball drags on with long innings, football stops all the time with commercials and timeouts, and even basketball slows down with free throws and fouls. In contrast, MMA gives five minutes of almost nonstop action each round. The fighters don't have time to stall or stand around. Even when the fight goes to the ground, fans know a submission or reversal could end the fight in a matter of seconds. That constant possibility of something happening makes the sport exciting in a way that few others are.

Another reason why MMA grew so much is the UFC. In boxing, the best fighters do not always face each other because of different promotions and contracts. Fans get frustrated waiting years for big fights to actually happen. This contrasts with the UFC, where the best fighters go against each other more often. On top of that, the UFC holds events weekly, so there are regular flight nights and big pay-per-view cards that fans look forward to. This consistency of high-profile fights has helped the sport keep growing and has turned fighters like Conor McGregor, Ronda Rousey, and Israel Adesanya into stars that even casual sports fans know about.

Of course, not everyone loves MMA. Some people say it is too violent or too brutal. There is no denying that fights can end in knockouts, blood, or injuries. But the sport is not just about violence. Behind every fight, there are years of training, discipline, and skill. Fighters dedicate their lives to becoming great. Every punch, kick, or submission they attempt comes from years of practice and dedication to their sport.

When you put it all together, it is clear why MMA has become so popular. The fights are fast-paced, the athletes are incredibly skilled, and the sport connects people around the world. According to Combat Press, MMA is already the fastest-growing combat sport. Right now, it might not be yet at the level of basketball, soccer, or football, but it is moving in that direction fast.

graphic by Lilah O'Dair



file graphic by Kayla Le

RUNNING THE NUMBERS

LASA'S WINS AND LOSSES



graphic by Asher Zvi-Nova

graphic by Megan Gerold

| | |
|----------|---------|
| Home | Visitor |
| 1 | 6 |
| Football | |



graphic by Asher Zvi-Nova

graphic by Megan Gerold

| | |
|------------------|---------|
| Home | Visitor |
| 8 | 1 |
| Girls Water Polo | |

#1 in district

| | |
|-----------------|---------|
| Home | Visitor |
| 9 | 0 |
| Boys Water Polo | |

graphic by Megan Gerold



graphic by Asher Zvi-Nova

New Trainer Talks LASA

ZACHARY EGLER | staff writer

The clock is ticking, the score locked in a tense tie. Suddenly, the crowd gasps, an athlete collapses, grabbing their ankle in pain. Before any of the coaches or players can react, an athletic trainer rushes onto the field focused and calm amid the chaos. When

As a former collegiate soccer player and now LASA's new athletic trainer, Chelsea York experienced both sides of sports injuries. Before she ever taped an ankle or stretched out a sprained muscle, she was the one on the trainer's table. During her college soccer career, a knee injury led to surgery and months of recovery, during this time she worked closely with her athletic trainer and that introduced her to the field and ultimately shaped her career path.

"I was an athlete all throughout high school, and I played soccer in college, and I had a major knee injury while I was in college, playing soccer, and I had surgery, and spent a lot of time with my athletic trainer," York said. "And working with that athletic trainer, I realized it's kind of like physical therapy, but focusing on sports, and you get to work with athletes who are a highly devoted population versus just the general population... So that really got me into athletic training, and then from there, I got a master's in it."

That experience launched York into athletic training, where she has since earned her master's degree and built a career around helping athletes recover and return to their sports. After stints at Rice University and Austin Achieve High School, she has brought her talents to LASA.

York remarked on the unique academic environment at LASA and how LASA students value academics. She highlighted how this dynamic between athletics and academics shows the drive and passion the students have toward their sport and academics.

"Everyone warned me about how academic it was, and then getting here, like, I really saw how important academics are to the students," York said. "It was also really nice getting here and seeing how much [LASA students] pour into your studies and how important school is for them."

Beyond academics, LASA students have qualities that make for a unique school environment. York said that she was surprised by the characteristics of a LASA student that don't involve studiousness.

"I would say maturity-wise [is] very surprising, for sure, and still, also being kids and, you're interested in those sensitive things. So I was surprised by that," York said.

York's favorite part of the job is the recovery process. Watching student-athletes put in the effort to return from injuries makes the work meaningful.

"My favorite part of the job is seeing athletes that were injured come back and their work ethic during recovery," York said.

York admitted her career hasn't been without challenges. Early on, she had to learn unexpected lessons.

"At the very beginning, as an athletic trainer, I wasn't great at talking to coaches, and I didn't think that that would be such a big



SAVING THE DAY Chelsea York is the athletic trainer for student at LASA. Trainers like York are crucial for ensuring the safety of athletes who suffer from injuries. photo by Ellington Tough

part of the job," York said. "Communicating with coaches about injuries and being clear on who can do what. So that was one thing I had to learn."

The other challenge came from her own background as an athlete. Her old habits as an athlete did not translate well once she became a trainer.

"I was always told 'play through pain' and 'don't come out or say anything unless something's really bad'," York said. "So I kind of tried to force that mentality on athletes in the beginning without realizing that these kids are really hurt, like they do need a couple weeks to come back. That kind of took an adjustment."

She also noticed the unique challenges of training high school athletes compared to college players. While college athletes treat their sport like a full-time job, high schoolers often have to juggle academics, sports, and more.

"Collegiate setting, that's their whole life," York said. "You guys have so much on your plate and you're going home and having five hours of homework that you can't get to rehab or can't be the stuff that you have at home. So I'd say that is a tough part of the job. I usually try to work with them about their schedule."

Even more difficult are the demands on her time. The days are long, and the sport medicine field itself does not get much recognition.

"The hardest part is long hours for sure, we're here all day, every day, and then just athletic training in general. It's not a very respectable field," York said.

Despite those challenges, York said she loves her role at LASA. Though she might one day consider teaching athletic training at a university, for now she's focused on her high school student-athletes.

"The only other setting that I think I would pivot to is teaching athletic training at the university [level]," York said. "I love the teaching side of athletic training, and I think teaching at that level, where it's in a Master's course and they're about to be athletic trainers themselves, that's what I could see myself doing as well."

Through injuries, recovery, and every comeback in between, LASA athletes can count on Chelsea York to be there.

“It was also really nice getting here and seeing how much [LASA students] pour into [their] studies and how important school is for them.”

- CHELSEA YORK, ATHLETIC TRAINER

THE RAPTOR RUN DOWN

MADDIE DIAS-STANG | staff writer

Every issue, The LASA Liberator sends a reporter into the field to try a new sport and write about their experiences.

Knees quaking, hands out in front of me, I'm bracing for impact on the grassy field. At eight years old, that was my first experience with volleyball. Every "whoosh" the ball made as it soared over my head after the more experienced players served could make the calmest person look around in fear of getting hit. I always thought that would be my impression of volleyball: just grass stains and hurt forearms.

My whole perspective was changed the day I practiced with the LASA volleyball program. While the team started with scrimmages before practice, I spoke to team manager Diana Robles-Ortiz, who has been managing the team for two weeks so far. I learned that she has a connection with volleyball through her family, even though she does not play it herself. It made me smile inwardly, knowing that there are still places on sports teams for those who want to be a part of the team in another way. It was warming to see the team talking and laughing with her off the court when they had the chance, like one big family.

Once the girls were done with the scrimmages and pre-practice play, everyone swooped towards the relief of their water bottles. It was then that I got to talk to everyone, asking questions and listening to conversations, hoping to grasp the group's dynamic. I could see how close they all were to each other as I overheard bits of borrowing clothes and questions about the upcoming football game.

I heard the nostalgia in each voice as they shared fond memories with me of traditions like big sisters, little sisters. It was an adorable way to pair up the freshmen with upperclassmen and bring a real sense of family to the whole team.

They all grinned as they told me about how every Wednesday is "Wacky Wednesday." To participate in this tradition, the girls have to dress up and work out in costumes. The best costume does less conditioning.

To my pleasant surprise, it was the day to pick team and spirit captains. I learned that the captains were an essential part of the team, providing both leadership on and off the court for every player on the team. First, the players voted, separating across the gym to ensure secrecy, and then the new leaders were announced. Every girl oohs and ahhs as the coach builds suspense for the results. They all clap and cheer when each girl is chosen.

While the girls practiced their serves, I picked up on the freeing feeling of being inside the gym. Everyone makes no effort to suppress any grunts as they determinedly hit the ball. A couple of girls announce that their serves are for one another, which is followed by small giggles and laughter as they try to stay focused. To my startling surprise, the buzzer sounds, and the players automatically go from one exercise to another, unfazed by the loud clanging.

As the end of practice neared and before the head coach, Emily Kossa, left, the girls wished for her safety on the ride home, giving her advice for curing her feverish symptoms. In the midst of this, the newly appointed captains got to take charge for the rest of the practice. At first, this would prove to be a startling task, having to keep everyone focused and practicing at the same time. The captains delegated and took charge, not afraid to get loud or give instructions. After a serve or a hit, everyone continued to clap, even in the face of constant directions from teammates.

When the team takes a break, the girls apologize for the harsh words and loud voices in the midst of the practice. They all pat each other on the back, supporting each other even in tense situations.

After observing the practice, I also picked up on how hard they are willing to work. I kept hearing "one more!" each time they hit the supposed last ball. They don't allow their long week to get the best of them as they put everything into each hit and serve. This instills a sense of pride in me, knowing that these girls are representing the school we attend.



GAME, SET, SERVE Maddie Dias-Stang throws the ball up and serves. Ensuring the proper stance is necessary for not just a good throw but safety as well. photos by Pratik Gurijala

LASA Hits the Track

ANDREW DRUMMOND | staff writer

In 2022, Austin ISD's (AISD) board of trustees and later, constituent voters, approved a \$2.44 billion bond proposal. These bonds are created by the district's board of trustees and voted upon by Austin's residents to fund the district's needs. Bonds operate on a five to six-year cycle, and 2022's bond has been particularly repair and modernization-oriented with the task of creating a turf field and installing high-quality lighting systems on the track of eight AISD high schools. The campuses currently receiving this upgrade are LBJ, Northeast, LASA, Bowie, Anderson, McCallum, Navarro, Travis, Crockett, and Akins. According to Michael Mann, AISD's Executive Director of Construction Management, one of the goals of the bond was to enable every school to have the ability to host a home game.

"It was identified as a need and a goal for the district to have artificial turf fields at each of the high schools," Mann said. "Our central facilities are overloaded."

These central facilities include Nelson Field, Burger Stadium, and House Park, which cannot keep up with the number of middle school, junior varsity, and varsity games that they need to host. Mann highlighted these struggles and the stress it puts on those facilities to manage that many games, and he emphasized how the bond's improvements can ease this burden.

"Scheduling all those [games] gets pretty tricky and puts a lot of burden on those facilities," Mann said. "With these artificial turf fields at the high schools, we will be able to host sub-varsity games at the high school sites."

Logistical issues aren't the only reason behind the construction of new facilities, according to Mann. Many fields used by AISD schools, like the Noack multi-purpose facility, are composed of real grass, which adds another layer of difficulty in terms of upkeep and repairs.

"It's basically impossible to keep grass alive with the number of student athletes we have on the field," Mann said. "That's why you see most districts going to artificial turf. There's just too much play on them."

Furthermore, turf fields eliminate many issues with the weather. Compared to a normal field, turf fields drain water better, which eliminates the waiting time after the rain stops because the field does not have to dry.

"If we have natural [grass] and it rains, we have to stay off of that for a while," Mann said. "If we have artificial turf and it rains, you can be back out there after the rain stops, and you're not going to destroy the field by having student athletes [on it]."

According to Mann, due to the maintenance requirements of grass fields, AISD spending for these fields has become increasingly expensive with upkeep compared to artificial turf fields. This, coupled with a budget deficit, means the transition is necessary monetarily.

"We don't have the operating budget to maintain natural grass the way that it needs to

be," Mann said. "If you were ever out there, you know the fields weren't exactly level. They needed some maintenance, and maintaining natural turf is quite expensive. We were looking to address those issues."

While it may be an expensive endeavor to replace fields, AISD sees the expense as worthwhile in the long run. Grass fields require constant maintenance and occasional reseeding, both of which are expensive endeavors. A one-time investment such as this will save the district more money in the long run. On top of this, the conditions of AISD's grass fields have led to complaints by community members, parents, and students of AISD to district leaders regarding the necessary maintenance and repairs.

"It wasn't just campuses," Mann said. "It wasn't just district personnel. It was parents and community members. We had some students on those committees, and it was identified as one of the needs ... any way we can support student athletes [we need to], just like we need to support fine arts and CTE programs and the rest of the programs at the campuses."

After three years since the bond was passed, construction has begun at LASA. Mauro Garza, a LASA sophomore and member of the soccer team, is ecstatic about the field's arrival.

"I'm very excited for this new field," Garza said. "They've been talking about giving us turf for years, and it'll feel good now that it's finally a reality."

The construction of these fields was not a straightforward process. Many aspects go into these kinds of bond projects apart from the digging and building, as Mann highlighted.

"There was a lot of work that we had to do to get through the permitting with the city," Mann said. "I know it seems like it should be an easy thing to do, but there is quite a bit of complexity with stormwater runoff and impervious cover. So we worked closely with the city, but it took longer than everybody wanted it to."

Mason Perrott, another sophomore on the soccer team, concurs. He, too, is excited for the installation of a turf field.

"I think that LASA's new turf and a new track onto that field is a great idea. The previous field was half dirt and half dead grass, so this is an exciting project."

It's not just the students who are excited, though. Nancy Zamora, LASA's track coach, is also looking forward to the new sports facilities, specifically for the prospect of hosting home games.

"I'm excited because we've never been able to host our own events here," Zamora said. "It'll be cool to finally be able to host and be in charge of them... [it] builds community within our campus."

According to the AISD Bond website, use of the new field is expected to begin in Q1 of the 2026 school year, which is between January and March. There are possibilities for delay if weather conditions or unforeseen construction issues necessitate it.

New Concussion Bill

PILAR DETTMER | staff writer

On May 1, 2025, a new bill was passed in the state of Texas, which updated and expanded on the state's existing concussion protocols.

This bill went into effect on Sept. 1, 2025, and it orders that students with concussions should be provided with accommodations in the classroom, athletes should immediately be pulled from activities if a concussion is suspected, and a doctor's note is now required from athletes to return to any activities. Vincent Cruz, a softball and football coach at LASA, has seen how this protocol has worked at LASA in the past.

"The Concussion Protocol at LASA has always been a strict and thorough protocol," Cruz said. "If a student is suspected of having a concussion, the rules are very strict and are administered with fidelity to ensure there is no further injury, such as second impact syndrome."

Even before the change in protocol, LASA has always had an intense concussion procedure, according to Cruz. The LASA staff worked to ensure that students got the best possible care that could be offered to help prevent further injury.

"Coach Ta and Coach Torres were on top of all concussions and made sure that each athlete who was suspected of a concussion was always seen by the trainers, referred to the doctor, and, if needed, placed on a concussion protocol," Cruz said.

LASA's athletic trainers have continued to go beyond the law when it comes to treating concussions in school. However, the new protocol will add more involvement from doctors compared to the previous one. One of LASA's athletic trainers, Calvin Ta, spoke on the new protocol and how it will affect students missing class due to concussions.

"The new form allows the physician to be more specific as to which accommodations an athlete will need based on their initial and current symptoms because most, if not all, accommodations are listed out on the form," Ta said. "This will allow the athlete to perform in school without needing to miss out on class compared to being out for two weeks in more jaded protocols."


This increased involvement from physicians is intended to help students be more accommodated in the classroom. Cruz is hopeful this will help these athletes not fall as far behind as they would under older protocols.

"I think the change in protocol will be beneficial to athletes because it prioritizes their long-term health and safety," Cruz said. "A stricter, more structured process ensures concussions are identified quickly, treated seriously, and managed consistently. This lowers the risk of athletes returning to play too soon and suffering from second-impact syndrome or long-term cognitive issues."

This new protocol will help athletes in the classroom as well as help them recover by not allowing them to return to athletics until their physician has cleared them to do so. Sophomore and LASA softball team member Zoe Roberts voiced their thoughts about the new protocol.


"I am for this change because I believe that athletes should be accommodated when suffering from a performance-altering injury," Roberts said.

This new bill updating the existing concussion protocol in Texas went into effect on Sept. 1, 2025, with both athletes and staff alike hopeful for how it will be beneficial to individuals recovering from concussions.





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A SPLASH OF NATURE

Natural Pools Around Austin

APOLLO DAHMUS
LILY ANTONY
MILLER WILLIAMS | photo editors



BARTON SPRINGS SKYLINE People at Barton Springs doing various activities on each side and swimming in the water. Barton Springs on a week day in the summer, photo by Lily Antony

"Barton Springs is a natural pool and we can't use pesticides or chemicals or anything in the water because it's a protected wildlife habitat," McGowan said. "So really our thing is just you know scrubbing what we can, getting the algae off what we can."

Shaver explained that another large impact these pools create is community. Morris explained how McKinney Falls creates a space of conservation and community.

"I do think McKinney Falls is important," Morris said. The park protects nature and gives people a place to enjoy the outdoors right in Austin."

Since Blue Hole is a spot not too far out of Austin in Wimberly, about 35 miles, it is a popular place where people connect with nature. Shaver described how Blue Hole connects people with nature and community by holding many events throughout the year.

"From the time that I've been here, that's been my main goal is to build community," Shaver said. "And have a space where people can go outside and just get away from their daily lives."

McGowan described Barton Springs as playing a central role in Austin life. The pool is near downtown Austin in Zilker Park, making it a popular destination in Austin.

"Barton has a really big impact on the community," McGowan said. "It's part of what makes the Austin community so vibrant because it's really where I see a lot of people coming together."

Together, these natural pools provide a unique space to balance recreation, conservation, and community for the people who work at and visit them. Their continuous maintenance and popularity show how these natural pools have a central role in Austin's identity.

Natural pools are central to summer recreation, and since the Austin area is home to many, they bring in visitors from all over Texas.

Popular spots like Barton Springs Pool, McKinney Falls State Park, and Blue Hole Regional Park have historical and environmental importance in the area because, unlike chlorinated swimming pools, natural pools are upkeep using natural environmental features like plants and microbes. Brian McGowan, a lifeguard at Barton Springs, described the most important differences between the types of pools.

"[Natural Pools] are usually a lot nicer and cleaner, and the water is colder, which is great," McGowan said. "My main thing is that it's a lot colder, and it's super nice when you get in the water versus a neighborhood pool when it's all gross and soupy and chlorinated."

McKinney Falls State park is the home of another natural pool; it has water elements throughout the park with a central swimming area with a waterfall. Lina Morris, a senior at LASA who visited McKinney Falls at the beginning of the summer in 2025 and has swam at different spots around Austin, explained that she enjoyed swimming in the natural pool at McKinney Falls State Park.

"My favorite part was swimming in the water from the falls," Morris said. "It was quite refreshing, and watching the waterfalls rush powerfully into the water."

Maintaining these pools requires year-round maintenance. Richard Shaver, the director of parks and recreation for Wimberly since 2017, where Blue Hole is, explained that Blue Hole has an off-season to allow the pool to recover.

"We're only open May through September," Shaver said. "We do that for the entire off-season. The swimming area, the riparian area, the creek, all of our natural spaces, have some time to rest and recover."

Barton remains open throughout the entire year, but it closes at certain times for maintenance. There are many different cleaning procedures at Barton Springs, like wiping the railings, scooping gunk out of the pool, and cleaning the bathrooms. McGowan described part of the process to maintain the pool.



BLUE HOLE People swim and float in the waters in Blue Hole Regional Park. It is during a summer day in Wimberly, Texas, where people can swim in the natural pool and have picnics near the water, photo by Lily Antony



MCKINNEY FALLS The central swimming area in McKinney State Falls where people are swimming and on top of the waterfall. The natural pool is reachable by walking through the park and has a rock beach attached to it, photo by Lily Antony



MCKINNEY FALLS The main swimming area in McKinney Falls State Park where people are sitting on the rocks. This area is within the park and connected to the water system throughout the park, photo by Lily Antony



BARTON SPRINGS People at Barton Springs jumping of the diving board, swimming, and sitting on the edge. People hang out in Barton Springs during the week throughout the summer, photo by Lily Antony