

A pool of their own

A district natatorium would provide equity, safety, reliable practice facility

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I wake up at 4:45, roll out of bed, get ready to go to swim, and drive 30 minutes to the outdoor pool we practice at. It's 32 degrees, and I can see the steam rising from the water as I jump in. For the past three years, we've practiced at a six-lane outdoor facility because there is no designated practice facility in Austin ISD.

Although implementing a natatorium is undoubtedly the best option if the district wants to provide an equitable and safe place for swimmers to practice, this project wouldn't come without challenges. An indoor pool costs between \$300,000 and \$500,000 to build, and that's before the plethora of other expenses like staff and equipment.

Although bringing an indoor pool to AISD would be laborious, the idea isn't unprecedented. Austin is one of the few school districts that doesn't have a natatorium. School districts in San Antonio, Dallas, Houston and even smaller districts like Belton all have natatoriums.

In the years before COVID, finding a practice facility wasn't as much of a problem. The Jamail Texas swimming center at UT used to be rented out to AISD schools.

During the pandemic, however, the swim center was closed for over a year. When it finally reopened, the facility was no longer available to AISD schools, likely because they could make more money renting the space to club teams.

Swim is one of the few UIL sports in Austin that doesn't have a practice facility provided by the district. Each team has to scramble to find a pool to rent at the start of the season. This can be upwards of hundreds of dollars each month.

The McCallum team currently uses the Great Hills Country Club outdoor pool, 15-20 minutes away from the school.

Not only does training inevitably become uncomfortable when it's cold, but practices are

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Teams that have more parent funding get the opportunity to practice at better facilities. This gives them unfair advantages in swim meets. Now that McCallum's team has doubled in size from 18 swimmers last year to 36 swimmers this year, the need for a spacious indoor facility is more apparent than ever. The bigger team, although an advantage for competitions, is also a disadvantage at practice because there are six swimmers in each lane.

Possible solutions for this year are splitting the team up into two separate practices which was a solution used during COVID, but again this limits the amount of practices each swimmer

can have in a week.

A \$2.18 billion bond will be on the ballot in the upcoming November election. All high schools will be getting a new competition field, but there's no support for AISD swim teams or their facilities. \$500,000 dollars from the bond could be used to build a

natatorium for AISD, a worthy investment considering that the district could earn money from the natatorium as well. The facility could host swim meets and rent out to swim teams in need of a pool.

Overall, the McCallum swim team and other AISD swim teams alike are in desperate need of a pool of their own because the sport deserves the same respect, equity, safety and convenient training facilities that other sports are afforded.

CAPTION:
With no facility to accommodate the growing program, the swimmers practice in overcrowded lanes as the team has doubled in size since last year.
Photo by Kate Boyle.

left:
Swim team members dive into the pool at the Jamail Texas Swimming Center at UT during the 2022 state meet.

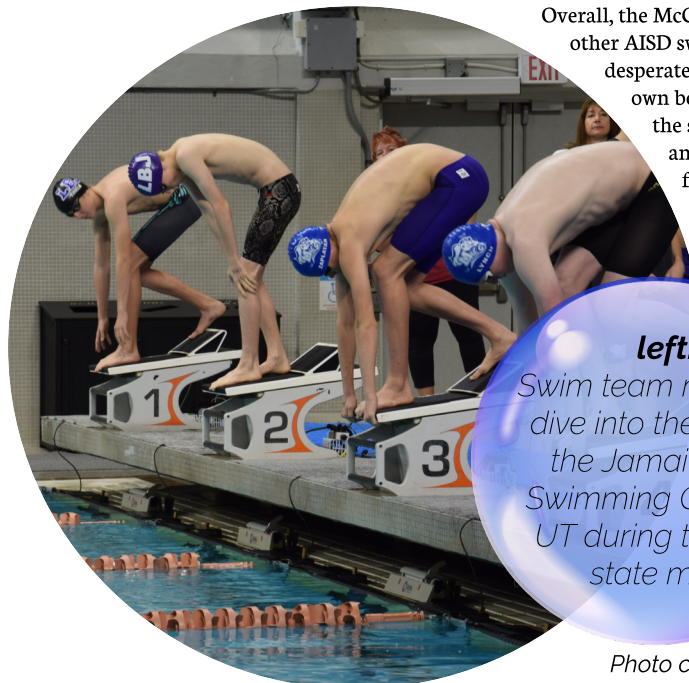


Photo courtesy of Kate Boyle