



At Large Candidate: Ahmed Hussein

VOTER GUIDE for 2023

FAIRFAX COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD

Fairfax County Special Education PTA (SEPTA) is a 501(c)3 advocating for special education students in Fairfax County Public Schools, their families and the staff who work with them. We are a part of the Fairfax County Council of PTAs and are members of the Virginia PTA and National PTA. You can read more about us on our website: www.FairfaxCountySEPTA.org

We believe that the Fairfax County School Board is one of the most important and influential government bodies affecting the success of the students and staff for whom we advocate. It is critical that our membership and others in the community are educated about the issues that concern our students and staff and the positions that all candidates take on those issues. For this reason, we have developed a questionnaire that we are sending to all candidates.

SEPTA is a non-partisan organization. We show no preference in the dissemination of our survey and in the publication of any responses received. Thus, all candidates were sent this questionnaire on the same date, all responses were due on the same date and all responses were shared publicly at the same time.

All responses are published verbatim, as received. Each respondent's submissions are published individually on the SEPTA website via individual links to each candidate.



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Question 1:

For students with disabilities (SWD), transitioning from secondary school into post-secondary independence is an extremely complex process that requires coordination between FCPS, local and state government agencies, and a variety of other public and private entities. Some examples of transition services include job training, housing, transportation, personal-finance management, professional internships, employment training programs, and college and career guidance in secondary schools. Fairfax County has a severe shortage of accessible resources and services for disabled students, regardless of ability (including, but not limited to, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and twice-exceptionality). *What are your plans for collaboration with Fairfax County government leadership and other agencies in order to streamline the transition process and prioritize funding and development of services for post-secondary students leaving the public school system, such as employment and life skills bridging opportunities, affordable housing, financial planning, and transportation?*

Response:

Collaboration and coordination of resources between the school system, the County and State agencies is critical to maximize the impact of educational services on students with special needs. I would therefore encourage Fairfax County government leadership to become more aware of theory and practices related to the transition needs in the question. I would ask these officials to reach out to organizations with the knowledge and implementation of the transition process. This has to be accomplished on multiple levels for example, I would encourage these leaders to become aware of the federal Department of Education efforts through the National Technical Assistance Center on Improving Transition to Post secondary Education and Employment for Students with Disabilities (NTACT/Center). I would work with Fairfax County officials to coordinate with State and local government agencies to determine their implementation commitment to this federal approach. I would ask the leaders at these levels to contact local nonprofit organizations that provide transition services, often referred to as Independent Living Services. I will explore the academic literature on the transition process. With this additional knowledge, I would work with county leaders to set up groups (including education representatives, parents



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and county officials, and other school stakeholders) to explore this transition issue and to determine how the transition services in public schools could be enhanced. The recommendations would address best practices for transition and consider the required budgetary needs to enable improved transition services to high school students, especially those with disabilities.

Question 2:

Currently, Instructional Services (general education) has staff dedicated to ongoing curriculum development while the Department of Special Services (DSS), which houses special education, does not. Therefore, the full responsibility for developing individualized special education curriculum and resources falls to the individual teachers and schools; thus, creating inconsistency, a lack of fidelity, and a high workload for special education teachers, many of whom teach multiple grade levels in one classroom. *How would you address this staffing inequity? Would you support additional permanent funding in the budget to hire dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources?*

Response:

I support fully the funding of dedicated staff who specialize in the development of a special education curriculum where there is an opportunity for a standardize approach. Students with disabilities include those with a variety of ailments. . Consequently, I would work with school board colleagues as we encourage the adoption of curricula that address common and individual needs., I would encourage county government leaders to provide additional funding to hire specialists in special education development. If funding is made available, I would work with school board colleagues as we encourage those responsible to implement a recruitment plan to hire more teachers with skills to enhance special education curricula.The recruitment effort must abide by equity policies. In the meantime, I would also encourage school administrators to relook their approach to special education to ensure that changes are made to lighten the burden of existing special education teachers.



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Question 3:

With the implementation of the Equitable Access to Literacy Plan, FCPS has been making strides toward implementing best-practice literacy instruction that follows the Science of Reading. Thus far, efforts have been focused on elementary grade instruction, particularly K-2 in the general education environment. Unfortunately, no explicit, consistent, county-wide plans have been made to allow this programming to be accessible to SWD who are taught in self-contained settings. Additionally, no plans have been made to address students (regardless of placement in general education, special education, or advanced academics) in upper elementary and secondary school who have “missed” critical best-practice literacy instruction based on the Science of Reading. Implementation of literacy instruction in secondary schools varies wildly from school to school, and even within schools, between Cat A & Cat B placements. Further, despite funding a new elementary basal resource for literacy, FCPS still lacks appropriate Tier 3 literacy interventions for all ages. Furthermore, evidence-based intervention practices typically require daily instruction, which cannot readily be achieved with the current format of block scheduling in FCPS secondary schools. *How will you ensure that all students with disabilities, ranging from students in self-contained Cat B settings to twice-exceptional gifted students, receive evidence-based literacy instruction with fidelity and, if needed, appropriate Tier 3 interventions?*

Response:

The best way to ensure that all children with disabilities, whether they are in self-contained settings or in classes with students without disabilities, is to start as early as possible. The Fairfax Public Schools System officials are committed to equitable literacy as outlined in their Equitable Access to Literacy (EAL) plan. Early learning is important in the long run for these children to ensure that they have the skills they need for when they start school. However, literacy skills need to be extended beyond the usual K-3 levels. Consequently, I would work with school board colleagues to determine how we may help to improve the literacy of students in higher grades. I would also encourage the Fairfax Public School officials to ensure that Tier 3 interventions are made early and continue through higher grades, ensuring equity for all students. I would therefore encourage school administrators to be knowledgeable of the evidence-based intervention approach and ensure that teachers and other appropriate staff are aware of how to implement it. Special education staff should also be trained to use effectively



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this approach with students with disabilities. Another way that I would support children with disabilities, along with twice-exceptional gifted students literacy instruction is through mandating that the curriculum development staff ensure that our literacy support material include lesson plans for this cohort of students.

Question 4:

The national teacher shortage is directly impacting FCPS, particularly in special education. Based on staff feedback we've received, we have significant concerns about FCPS special education staff burnout due to many contributing factors. For instance, assigning caseloads by headcount, as is done in FCPS, rather than by IEP service hours often leads to caseload inequity, resulting in students not receiving the full services and supports they require. Additionally, some special education chairs are still carrying caseloads and instructional hours beyond their contracted job description. Also, situations such as the 2022-2023 OCR agreement (regarding Covid compensatory services) continue to add hours and hours of work and tremendous stress on special education staff; teachers and related service providers did not feel sufficiently supported nor respected by central office administration throughout the process. *What will you do to support and retain the school-based special education staff (teachers, IAs, related services clinicians, and school-based administrators) who are burning out physically and emotionally? What will you do to help attract special education professionals to FCPS given the national, long-standing special education staff shortages?*

Response:

It is well known that special education teachers leave the profession up to two and half times more than other teachers. The pandemic and the mental health crisis in our schools have led to worsening attrition for these critical educators. Northern Virginia is blessed with many universities and colleges in the area. I would promote a long-term strategy of partnership between the County and a local university such as George Mason University or a college such as Northern Virginia Community College to create four- year tracks for special education teachers with a guarantee of a position once they are fully qualified. Furthermore, I would enhance this partnership through teacher vocational training and strong mentoring opportunities while the teachers are in school.



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In the short-term, I would advocate for increased pay and incentives such as loan forgiveness and bonuses to address the teacher shortage in FCPS. A targeted retention bonus for special education teachers would be my first action to address this issue. Furthermore, I would advocate for special education teachers to be exempt from administrative duties so that more time is dedicated to education and preparation.

I recently met a special education teacher who moved to Fairfax County who is the spouse of a service member. She said that Fairfax County's prerequisites for employment were the most complicated and expensive she has ever met. This included over \$200 in expenses for extra classes such as CPR which are required before employment. We want to attract more teachers who have the requisite skills. I would encourage Fairfax government policy makers to maintain necessary standards but reduce the unnecessary barriers. Teacher candidates, lacking minor requirements could be considered for hiring and then either pay them to take the needed classes or reimburse them. I would also ask the board to encourage administrators to review existing hiring practices to ensure equity in all aspects of school services.

Question 5:

What is your experience with special education, and what will you do to fill in any gaps in your knowledge about special education/disability/accessibility issues prior to making policy decisions that impact this population?

Response:

My experience with special education is limited to the horrible stories I have heard from frustrated parents and advocates. However, I will bolster my knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by students with special needs. I will therefore continue to review reputable articles online from federal, state and local governments, and nonprofit organizations committed to enabling children with disabilities. With this knowledge in hand, I will meet with students, advocacy groups, and parents at the beginning of my school board tenure to learn more in-depth the obstacles and challenges are students and families face and to look for ideas for ways to improve the current system in Fairfax County. I



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would also encourage that county government officials to consider not only county resources to aid students with disabilities but also those of the State, and Federal governments and nonprofit organizations committed to helping students with disabilities. There are many private and philanthropic organizations who are active in this space who can bring new ideas and approaches to ensure that all students with special educational needs receive individualized services so that they become productive members of our community. I will explore these entities and encourage other school stakeholders to reach out to these possible helping hands.