



At Large Candidate: Cassandra Aucoin

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.



At Large Candidate: Cassandra Aucoin

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:

My plan is to get to know the programs and organizations at the County and State level that provide these transition services, understand the processes involved, the funding and development of services, and talk to the organizations, parents and teachers about their experiences and possible improvements.

The STEP program is an example of a successful collaboration between local businesses in Fairfax County and FCPS staff with the purpose of increasing the independence and self-determination of special needs students with on-the-job training in real work settings but perhaps some changes could improve the process for the children with disabilities and their families. We need programs like STEP help to ease the transition from high school to employment and it also increases the students' social skills.

As part of a student's transition process to becoming independent, I will collaborate with the County Government Family Services/Housing to understand the needs and availability of housing units for the disabled. At the State level, I will advocate for more partnerships like the Wilson Workforce and Rehabilitation



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Center to provide comprehensive medical, assistive technology and vocational rehabilitation services to persons with disabilities in Fairfax County and help them gain increased independence and employment.

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 would support additional permanent funding in the budget to hire dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources. If we want to encourage current teachers and students pursuing teaching degrees to go into special education, we cannot continue to overload the teachers by expecting them to teach full time and develop curriculum. I would also like the dedicated staffing to work with testing organizations and the State to ensure there are adapted standardized test assessments for Fairfax County Students with Disabilities. The most recent Standard of Learning (SOL) scores show over 50% of the Fairfax County Students with Disabilities who took the SOLs failed the reading, writing, math, and history tests.

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



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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:

First, I would work with the State to make the Science of Reading accessible to Students with Disabilities. To be the most productive, research has shown having one-on-one or small group Science of Reading sessions during the core instructional day and accomplished daily maximizes student outcomes. I would work with the administration to identify alternative ways to incorporate these sessions, ranging from inserting into a modified block schedule format or within a more traditional method of scheduling. For Tier 3 interventions determined to be necessary, would promote a similar process and include support to be used at home.

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



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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:

To help support and retain the school-based special education staff: Some ideas:

- For a wholistic approach, I would establish a task force to review the current situation, identify the key issues and provide a set of improvement recommendations for recruiting and retaining special education staff for the near and long term.
- Other ideas that could be considered:
 - Work with the administration to reduce the number of tasks that take away from their teaching and planning time.
 - Enhanced Administrative support.
 - Respect their time/ensure they have time boundaries.
 - Work with the administration on the teacher/student ratio and if appropriate, assign students based on the type of disability and service hours needed. If legislative relief is needed, then I would work on sponsoring appropriate language.
 - Reach out to organizations that specialize in Special Education human resources and methods to get the best approaches and pilot the ones that appear to most benefit.
 - Smaller classroom sizes.
 - Additional pay.

To help attract special education professionals to FCPS, I would:

- Recommend higher pay and a pay scale that is tailored to the type of special education instruction and service provider support needed (e.g., Occupational Therapy, Speech Pathologist) to motivate more students to pursue a special education career path. For example, autism and significant behavioral challenges may require higher paid instruction.



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- Market the location, Fairfax County has a lot to offer.
- Create a positive school culture and management; enhance programs that allow prospective teachers to speak to role model teachers, establish a mentoring program for new teachers and support them.
- Expand pathways for conditional or part-time educators to become certified teachers.
- Provide informational materials to high school counselors and students who are interested in pursuing special education career paths to include State incentives for obtaining teacher certificates and financial aid.

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:

I do not have personal experience with special education. To fill my knowledge gaps, I have spoken to 14 different sets of parents who have a child either currently in Fairfax County Public Schools, have graduated, or been taken out due to issues regarding FCPS's Special Education program. Also, I have conducted research, gathering information on issues and best practices. As a member on the School Board, I will continue this practice of gathering information and input to become more knowledgeable about special education/disability/accessibility issues. I will:

- Continue to talk to parents, special education teachers, and reach out to community support programs e.g., Autism of NOVA, Autism Speaks, and Atlantic Seaboard Dyslexia Education Center (ASDEC) as policy is developed.
- Establish a standing parent/special education teacher workgroup to identify the issues, identify potential solutions for improving special education and further support the development of special education policy.
- Ensure that sufficient time is given to receive parent and community input prior to any policy that is brought forward to the School Board for adoption.



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One of my priorities is to encourage parental involvement in all aspects of their children's education and to promote positive partnership with teachers. Another priority is to recruit and retain the best teachers for both general and special education.