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**Springfield District: Debra Tisler**

# 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](http://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:**

**Streamlining the transition process begins with the IEP and its management. To have successful transition outcomes, the IEP teams must consider the needs and strengths of the child throughout the stages of transition identified for all students in Virginia Code (8VAC-20-131-140), which includes:**

**Academic and career plan portfolio in the elementary grades**

**College and career readiness**

**Career exposure, exploration, and planning**

**Opportunities for postsecondary credit**

**The early development of an academic career plan and consideration of that plan with the IEP team fosters collaboration and communication between the parent, student, school team, agencies, and all needed providers. Once the student turns 14 or enters the 8th grade and the required IEP transition plan is started, the academic career plan portfolio serves as data points to assist in the IEP transition planning process. At this time, the transition assessment process is also implemented, serves as the common thread in the transition process, and aids in forming goals and services to be included in the IEP. If the IEP team is unclear on**



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those goals and services, there will be gaps and missed transition opportunities for the student. Parents and students should have the different types of transition assessments and their characteristics made available to them before and during the IEP meeting when considering postsecondary transition planning.

Opportunities to explore and invite Fairfax County government agencies related to transition must become integral to the IEP transition process. To coordinate interagency collaboration, parents, students, FCPS IEP team members, and Fairfax County government agencies will be able to access and upload needed documents (with parental consent) into the IEP SEA-STARs record of their child. An individualized transition plan flow chart will be generated to monitor and ensure the necessary documentation is completed on a timeline. I will support and recommend an interagency task force composed of representatives from the Fairfax County government, FCPS, social services, employment agencies, the Virginia Department of Education, parents, and other relevant organizations. This task force will help facilitate communication, coordinate and/or expand resources, and streamline services for postsecondary transition. The task force will conduct a comprehensive needs assessment, including all current and relevant audits by all agencies, to identify the challenges postsecondary students face, such as employment, housing, financial planning, and transportation. The optimum result from this task force would be to develop and implement an interagency coordination services unit.

### **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?*



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### **Response:**

**Special education in FCPS is woefully mismanaged with an imbalance of central office administration focused on procedural processes. The focus and importance must be shifted back to instruction and student progress. I support combining Instructional Services (general education), MTSS, and the Department of Special Services under one model for developing curricula, methods, and assessments. FCPS can no longer have instructional departments working in silos if we are to support effective inclusion. Under one instructional services department, the individuals working there must work partially at the school-based level in the classrooms with students. Administrators can often lose sight of the realistic needs of students and their families. Maintaining their classroom experience will allow them to experience implementing their instructional designs in real time. Moving central office staff to the classroom will alleviate the critical staffing shortages we are currently experiencing. I support permanent funding in the budget to offer expanded teacher contracts to specialize in developing special education curricula and resources. Our teachers know the needs of the children and see them daily.**

### **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



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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:**

**Leadership and a culture of collaboration are essential to student success. Intervention isn't a process led by MTSS or special education. It's directed by all individuals working with the student, including the parents and private providers. I will support the development of literacy leadership teams at each base school. This literacy leadership team will include a facilitator or chair, administrator, teachers, school psychologist, related service providers, and contracted private providers. They will set timelines and goals and monitor data specific to the students' literacy achievement at that school. Parents will have access to their child's data and will have the opportunity to meet with grade-level literacy team members to review this data. School-based literacy teams will provide training opportunities for parents on what the literacy team has determined is needed for the students in their school. Streamlined digital access to resources and videos of literacy team models and lessons will also be available to parents. I will also support the expansion of teacher and parent resources at our local libraries through an interagency agreement with the Fairfax County government that will foster access to literacy instructional tools.**

**The current state of learning loss and the need for consistency of instruction requires consideration of returning to a standard schedule where each class in a student's schedule is taught every day. Consistency in the schedule will allow tiered programs to be taught with fidelity. Implementing direct, explicit, systematic instruction in the content areas is needed in Fairfax County Public Schools to meet the diverse needs of our students in all settings. Innovative staffing models, which include hiring part-time teachers, job-sharing opportunities, and moving qualified central office staff to the classroom, are also required to fill the staffing gaps to implement effective evidence-based literacy interventions across all settings.**



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### **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:**

**Innovative staffing models, which include job sharing, fair compensation to retired teachers, and extended contract pay to teachers fulfilling additional duties, must be considered to fill positions and reduce our teachers' class and caseload size. At this time, we must also build our staffing capacity with nonprofit partnerships, public-private partnerships, and interagency government partnerships at the state and local levels. Some of the stressors many of our teachers and staff feel regarding their health benefits and childcare need to be alleviated with better-negotiated contracts with insurance companies and opportunities for childcare. Investments must be made to streamline the IEP process, and compensation must be paid for time to complete them outside of contracted hours.**



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### **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 have 30 years of experience in the field of education as an educator and volunteer advocate for children with disabilities. As a former Fairfax County Public Schools Special Education Teacher, I know what works and what doesn't work for students, teachers, and staff. I have lived experience and the educational expertise that gives me an advantage to get started on day one. I have an extensive history of engaging with all the diverse members of the community when addressing issues that are important to us. In my experience, our families share their concerns with community leaders that they trust will advocate on their behalf. I have had the unique opportunity to impact the quality of education throughout the Commonwealth. Through my collaborations with federal legislators, the State Conference NAACP's Education Committee, JLARC, PEATC, and COPAA, I have elevated the voices of our families to create meaningful change. Recently, I contributed to the landmark study by JLARC regarding special education, resulting in 27 recommendations to improve special education for all families throughout the Commonwealth. Through my advocacy for families via the Office of Civil Rights, a monumental finding resulted for over 28,000 students, restoring their right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education, (FAPE). Finally, I assisted in authoring legislation that transformed the systems of accountability and preparation for individuals who develop special education programming. I am also the parent of a child with disabilities, so I have been on the other side of the table as well and have fully experienced the trials and tribulations of advocating for my child's needs. Throughout my 30 years of experience, I have compiled a vast array of contacts (including parents, teachers, administrators, private providers, advocates, legal experts, and legislators) in the special education field and have the ability to research knowledge gaps prior to making policy decisions.