



## Providence District: Karl Frisch

# 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:**

**While providing post-secondary students who have left the public school system with support for employment and life skills bridging opportunities, affordable housing, financial planning, and transportation, are not within the purview of Fairfax County Public Schools, these types of transition support services are critical to students with disabilities and their families.**

**As the school system continues to strengthen its transition support for students moving from elementary school to middle school and then to high school, we must look at staffing levels for transition services to make certain we can start support at younger ages. We must also do a better job of coordinating student transitions to county services as they exit the school system. The School Board and the Board of Supervisors should initiate a joint task force focused on strengthening coordination and providing better transition support.**

**Additionally, our school system must continue lobbying the Virginia General Assembly for additional resources and staffing dedicated to improved academic**



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and career planning, postsecondary transition planning services, and postsecondary employment options for students 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 would support additional permanent funding in the budget to hire dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources. That said, these types of specialists should be involved in all curriculum development. Additionally, special education teachers will continue differentiating to meet the individual needs of students. Providing access to a repository of suitable instructional materials could give special education teachers somewhere to start and ease workloads.**

**We must do everything we can to ease special education teacher workload so they can focus on delivering quality, individualized instruction to their students. Decreasing workloads will also help the school system retain our world-class special education teachers and recruit talented new hires. Ultimately, ALL curriculum development should be utilizing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to accommodate the needs and abilities of all learners and eliminate unnecessary obstacles to student success.**



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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:**

**I was proud to co-sponsor the successful proposal that initiated the School Board’s formal discussion for addressing literacy gaps with instructional practices grounded in the Science of Reading. Had it not been for our tireless advocates, especially the parents of students with disabilities, I do not know if the school system would have moved as quickly to fully transform the way it delivers literacy instruction – a truly colossal undertaking many years in the making.**

**The hard work is paying off. Superintendent Michelle Reid recently reported, among other signs of strength, that first and second grade iReady phonics performance is up 8 percent over pre-pandemic levels, and the number of students with disabilities meeting grade level expectations in the phonics domain of iReady are up 15 percent from Spring 2022 to Spring 2023.**



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To be clear, we must ensure **ALL** students with disabilities benefit from our equitable access to literacy plan. Our recently adopted 2023-30 Strategic Plan insists on academic growth and excellence for every student with a specific measurement of “students reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade.” The School Board must hold the Superintendent accountable for this important measurement, which includes reading success for our students with disabilities. Specifically, I will be looking for the Superintendent to provide best practices literacy instruction grounded in the Science of Reading with fidelity of implementation for all students and levels.

To determine if this is taking place, the School Board must remain in regular contact with parents and advocates (our boots on the ground) and insist that the school division be transparent by sharing robust data demonstrating progress (or not) toward full implementation that meets specific and differentiated student needs with appropriate disaggregation for all students with disabilities, ranging from students in self-contained Cat A and Cat B settings to twice-exceptional gifted students, and more.

Finally, we should use intervention blocks better by ensuring secondary students who need it receive daily literacy instruction explicitly grounded in the Science of Reading.

### **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*



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*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:**

**The special education teacher shortage is a national crisis requiring the sustained focus of local, state, and federal officials.**

**At the local level, we must offer reduced workload, pay incentives, and targeted training to better support special education teachers so they can focus on delivering quality, individualized instruction to their students. Our School Board created and funded special education department chairs to help provide teachers with increased bandwidth. We also extended special education teacher contracts demonstrating our appreciation for the extra time and work required to do their jobs. In addition to this work, we must also review staffing and program delivery models, reconsider how caseloads are assigned, and require special education training for administrators, general education teachers, and instructional assistants so that each can better support special education teachers and better serve special education students.**

**The Virginia General Assembly must significantly increase funding for public schools. A recent analysis from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) found that public schools in Virginia “receive less K–12 funding per student than the 50-state average, the regional average, and three of Virginia’s five bordering states.” In 2021 alone, Virginia’s public schools were underfunded by the state to the tune of nearly \$7 billion. Meanwhile, Congress must step up and finally fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which would provide states with more than \$23 billion in additional special education funds each year. They should also provide colleges and universities with incentives to produce more special education teachers.**

**Additional funding from our state and federal partners would help our school system address many of the issues surrounding special education teacher**



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**retention and recruitment, including opening the door to differentiated pay or bonuses and other creative strategies.**

### **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:**

**Before joining the School Board, my experience with special education had been through my friends who have children with disabilities. They had full-time jobs, mortgages to pay, children to raise, and all the other trappings that come with adult life. But unlike many of our other friends, they had to become quasi-paralegals to help ensure their kids got the free appropriate public education they are guaranteed by law and that many other parents seem to take for granted. I am in awe of their fortitude. Our school system owes it to these parents to do what it can to lighten their load.**

**On the School Board, I have come to know and work closely with many parents of and advocates for students with disabilities. Whether it was our work to finally prohibit restraint and seclusion or the passage of our new special education enhancement plan and strategic plan, the counsel of parent experts has guided my thinking and made the School Board's final work products more responsive to the needs of our students with disabilities and their families. Our school system is at its best when this collaboration is encouraged from the outset.**

**I am committed to continuing this approach with our parents and advocates because there is still significant work that requires our attention.**