



Mason District: Kristin Ball

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.



Mason District: Kristin Ball

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:

It is important for SWD to know that they are valuable members of the community. Offering post-graduation services goes a long way to accomplishing that. I would work with the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors to find money to provide some of these services, especially for employment training for SWD. General employment training services may not be compatible with their abilities. They need different guidance on finding appropriate employment, along with suitable transportation to a workplace.

However, high schools be encouraged to provide many of these services for all students, particularly college and career guidance and personal finance management. I would support having a SWD counselor dedicated to college and career guidance because that person would have the specialized knowledge necessary to work with special needs students (that a general education teacher might not have).



Mason District: Kristin Ball

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:

The heavy paperwork burden on teachers – especially special ed teachers – is leading to a teaching shortage. With a complete audit of the \$3.5 Billion FCPS budget, we need to find areas where money is being unnecessarily allocated and shift that money to resources needed for DSS. The amount of money that FCPS spends on lawsuits against parents with special needs children is obscene and could be used instead to eradicate the need for the lawsuits (i.e., using the money for the resources needed at DSS to serve the students with special needs and their families).

When DSS lacks resources, the teachers are overburdened, the parents are left without advocates (in some cases), and the students suffer. Yes, I would support additional permanent funding in the budget to hire dedicated staff for special education needs.

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



Mason District: Kristin Ball

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:

No student in FCPS should be denied access to appropriate reading instruction and teaching. In the case of special education, FCPS needs to fund dedicated DSS instructors and tutors until all students are caught up to grade-level reading. The same is true for general education students.

Having listened to parents at a Superintendent open forum recently, I learned about Lexia Core 5 Reading (also called Power Up for grades 6-12) that is an online literacy intervention. Parents noted that they had some success with that software. However, online programs should only serve to reinforce the actual in-person reading education. We need to fund in-person reading instruction and bring all students to grade-level proficiency.

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



Mason District: Kristin Ball

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:

Over the years, I have had many special ed teachers as friends, and I know that it is inherently a high burnout career path. Adding additional paperwork and unequal case loads only fuels the potential for burnout.

I would talk to special education experts to determine an appropriate student to teacher ratio that is best for both student learning and teacher satisfaction. Merely assigning students by headcount can be problematic if one teacher ends up with more severely disabled students while another teacher has fewer severely disabled students.

I know that an IA can be a critical component to a special education classroom if the IA is working in conjunction with the teacher (I have heard stories where they do not work well together, which causes additional issues). IAs need to also be adequately paid but also receive appropriate accreditation toward certifications.

Second, we need to hire appropriate faculty and staff for DSS to offset some of the paperwork that is currently overwhelming many special ed teachers. Removing some of the burdensome paperwork is one step toward reducing the likelihood of burnout.

As I've said before, parents in Fairfax County are greatly dissatisfied with the services provided for their special needs children. At some point, those parents are going to leave FCPS for a school system that provides a more solid education. Therefore, special education needs should be a top priority for the new School Board.



Mason District: Kristin Ball

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 would never make policy decisions about anything without first researching the issue and having as much knowledge as necessary to make an educated decision. Therefore, when I am on the School Board, it is my intention to work with parents and special education faculty to identify their needs and the best ways to fulfill those needs.

While I do not have a child with special needs, I have met many parents with special needs children. I have also had friends who are special ed teachers. Most of my knowledge about special education comes from hearing my friends talk about their work with students.