



Franconia District: Marcia St. John Cunning

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:

The spirit of this question aligns with the goals of the community school model in which strong partnerships are built between schools and community organizations, government agencies and private businesses. Whereas the school board has no funding authority regarding the development of services for post-secondary students with disabilities when it comes to services such as employment and life skills bridging opportunities, affordable housing, financial planning and transportation, it can explore establishing strong partnerships with community organizations, government agencies and private businesses to help make the transition process less cumbersome for students with disabilities. As a new school board member I want to learn more about how robust the FCPS transition process is for students with disabilities and how information regarding post secondary options and resources for students with disabilities are disseminated to families. The earlier this occurs the earlier parent and teachers can partner to work with the student to forge a plan forward. As a current community school coordinator and former family liaison I have seen the positive



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impact of having strong partnerships with stakeholder agencies and organizations.

I am well aware that there is a wide range of challenges faced by students with disabilities as they transition into the postsecondary world. So much of that is beyond the scope of FCPS. However, it is imperative that FCPS do all it can within its scope to prepare students and families to the highest degree so they can navigate the postsecondary transition with confidence.

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:

Currently I share a space with the preschool education team and I see how they collaborate on a daily basis to develop a curriculum that meets both the general education criteria while meeting the unique IEP requirements for each of their students. The process is time consuming and as equally invigorating as it can be frustrating. Having shared curriculum resources throughout the county would be invaluable to special education teachers, not to mention it would be more efficient and would provide greater consistency throughout FCPS. To that extent I would support funding for dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources. With the fast moving pace of new assistive technology, adapted resources and special education pedagogy, having a team that can incorporate successful evidence based practices in curriculum in a timely manner would benefit both teachers and students.



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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:

It is my understanding that the implementation of the equitable Access to Literacy Plan by following the Science of Reading is a recent occurrence. I know teachers in the building I work at have received the necessary professional development to implement this best practice instruction model. Having said that, I realize I have to learn the process FCPS uses to roll out its programming and to assure plans work on consistency in delivery of instruction throughout all grade levels as well as providing Tier 3 interventions as needed. I will work with my colleagues on the school board to assure students with disabilities including students in self contained Cat B setting to twice exceptional gifted students receive evidence based literacy instruction with fidelity. I look forward to learning more about how FCPS can move forward with a program that is already showing promise in helping students have a strong literacy foundation.



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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:

Like the rest of the nation FCPS is facing a shortage of teachers and in particular special education teachers and school based staff. Again, from my experience on the ground one of the biggest complaints I hear from special education teachers is the amount of administrative work that is on their plate. For example, having to coordinate an IEP meeting, particularly if an interpreter is needed, can be a logistical nightmare that should not fall on the plate of the teacher. When I first started working in FCPS many schools had the equivalent of a part-time administrative assistant dedicated to the special education team. That person handled the scheduling of local screenings, IEP meetings, securing an interpreter, making copies and maintaining special education files and paperwork. Reinstating this position would go a long way to help reduce the workload for our special education teachers. This is one small suggestion. However, the most important thing I can do as a school board member is to listen and learn from the special education teachers, IA's, and support staff and then work with other school board members and the Superintendent to find ways to address those concerns. Teacher compensation is important, but from what teachers tell me, it's more about being heard and seeing actions in response to



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their concerns. The majority of special education teachers I know are committed to their work, truly love their students and want to see them thrive. They just want the support they need so they can have the necessary physical and emotional bandwidth to do the job.

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:

In my capacity as a Spanish language interpreter for FCPS I have sat in hundreds of IEPs for students with disabilities from preschool through post-secondary programs such as those at the Davis and Pulley Centers. I have also been an interpreter for the variety of tests associated with the special education evaluation process including social history interviews. As a family-liaison I have worked with teachers to explain the special education process to families. As mentioned earlier, for the past two years I've shared an office with the preschool special education team at Mt. Vernon Woods Elementary, and have seen them in action first hand every day.

An important factor to also consider is the immigrant experience regarding students with disabilities and special education. Many of our immigrant families are cautious of the special education process and the perceived stigma it may have based on their country of origin. Throughout the years, teachers and administrators have trusted me to accurately explain the process to parents and to put them at ease. In one particular instance the parents of a student were in tears when their child was identified as needing special education services in the second grade. They were reluctant to approve services due to their perception of what special education was all about and the stigma attached to it. In the end they accepted the services. I witnessed the student progress through elementary school and then lost touch. You can imagine my surprise when I was the interpreter at the students' high school exit IEP. The parents were beaming because their child was graduating with an advanced degree and was planning to



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enroll at NOVA. Their child would be the first in the family to pursue a post-secondary education.

My experience with students with disabilities centers around specific students, families, special education teachers, specialists and the school staff I've worked with in the course of my 25 year career. I look forward to taking a deeper dive regarding policy issues as they pertain to students with disabilities. I know there are organizations such as SEPTA I can turn to for information. I also know I can rely on experts in the field such as our current school board member Rachna Sizemore Hiezer. However, I intend to be present in FCPS schools to continue having the one on one experience to best inform me on how to best support our students with disabilities and their families.