



Hunter Mill District Candidate: Melanie Meren

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:

I will continue advocating that Fairfax County government leadership and other agencies provide the services promised, expected, and needed by Fairfax residents - including students, recently-graduated students, and FCPS employees working for students' success.

Having served my first term on the School Board during the covid pandemic, I experienced how public schools were left to make public health decisions and fill gaps in other public services. This is not appropriate, not sustainable, and not in the best service of residents. Since then, I've continuously advocated that other community agencies and partners do their share to provide essential community services. This is on-going work, and really the work to advocate for public education in America today.

More is needed than joint committees between Fairfax county government and FCPS. Real partnership-building, on a foundation of funding, is needed to remove the barriers of bifurcated and non-existent services. There are currently too many gaps and administrative hurdles for FCPS staff and students and families.



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My plan is to hold the Superintendent accountable for developing a budget that includes what the budget asks are to the County and the public.

It's important that School Board Members understand the extensive matrix of policies and funding sources from local, state, and federal levels. Continuing to build partnerships and work together, across agencies, is what is needed. My experience in my first term, and through community advocacy and public policy work throughout my career, qualifies me to be the strongest candidate available to serve residents in Hunter Mill and Fairfax.

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 have advocated that special education instruction services be housed within and alongside Instructional Services. The very purpose of Special Services is to educate students with identified needs - whether these are due to a disability or an advancement, like for our twice exceptional ("2e") students.

Certainly there's an operations side of that which requires careful attention and implementation, including administering legally-required assessments, paperwork, meetings, class assignments, and more. But the instructional goal is the same as in general education - to educate students to their greatest potential. The current arrangement reinforces a mindset of exclusion instead of inclusion.



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Absolutely, I support funding dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources. I also support general educators receiving professional development and training so that they can help identify learning needs that may need further evaluation by Special Services - especially in our youngest students. Additionally, I'm proud to have voted on the Board to create and fund the first ever NeuroDiversity Specialist in FCPS - and seemingly the nation - and want to see that work expanded and embedded to its full potential.

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:

First, I championed the Equitable Access to Literacy (EAL) plan, and the state-level legislation that helped expand the work in Fairfax. I am aware that this work happened due to the incredible level of advocacy of trusted community groups and parents/families, including SEPTA.



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Second, the EAL work will take years to realize the for the full capacity and reach to be realized. Educating K-2 is the logical start, since research shows that reading difficulties prolonged from grade 3 onward compound students' literacy challenges. Work is happening to address literacy learning needs of students in grade 3 and upward but yes, it's not as rapid as the K-2 work, yet. I am frustrated that this work wasn't happening sooner in this school division, but FCPS is on the right track now and that is in part due to my efforts. Future School Board Members must remain committed to this work, as I certainly am. All students need the best literacy instruction and all educators need to understand what that looks like. I will work to make the EAP move forward as quickly and effectively as possible, because students can't wait a moment longer.

Third, about block scheduling: secondary schedules must be improved so that students have more options to explore topics of interest and get extra help as identified. However, the current schedule does not frame this as well as it should. Starting in middle school, students must decide whether to cease studies they began in elementary school - like world language, music, and art - to take needed courses for graduation and life beyond. So at the most fundamental level, I am already advocating to improve scheduling to better benefit all students. I am keenly aware of the barriers that our students in secondary grades have faced, in trying to take varied and advanced coursework with a disability - this must be rectified to meet students' potential.

Finally, about self-contained settings: FCPS needs to clarify its philosophy about when self-contained settings are appropriate, and work to achieve inclusion otherwise as much as it is possible and safe for all. Then funding of staff and programs can be designed around this expectation. I've heard advocacy and data from an array of parents, students, staff, and community members, with some advocating strongly for self-contained settings; however, more often, what I hear is a cry for inclusion and a dislike of segregation.

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,



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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:

I will continue to work on decreasing class size, as this is the best way to decrease the stress on teachers. I will also continue working to have teachers' planning time protected and that their duties remain realistic and relevant to their instructional expertise.

However, universally, public education is in a crisis of losing teachers and operational staff. This problem stems from public opinion and treatment of educators; inadequate teacher preparation programs in colleges to meet the needs of today's learners; and working conditions in public schools that include limited compensation due to arcane revenue formulas, the pressure to meet state standards, and magnified public claims of a lack of trust despite the majority of families being pleased with their experience.

The divisive, damaging, and extremist language regarding our public schools harms hiring and retention. This language has no place in public discourse and does nothing to support students. We must work together as a community to fully fund schools and attract and retain great teachers.

Additional strategies include: 1) competitive compensation and benefits; 2) revamping the standardized testing framework and schedule; and 3) improving safety in schools and communities.



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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:

During this first term on the Board, I approved the Special Education Audit plan, and participated in public meetings with the Board, staff, and contractors about this work. I have also communicated regularly with my appointee to the Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities, and have advocated for ACSD's work consistently.

As a parent, I will say generally that I have first-hand experience with students with identified needs, including an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and a 504. I understand the challenges, but I also see the great strengths and abilities that each and every student has. Sometimes we must use labels to ensure students are identified to get what they need, especially when it comes to fulfilling legal obligations and meeting the law. But I do see that students - all children and adults, really - have a range of abilities and challenges. So the more appropriate mindset, I've found, is to look at instruction and the FCPS experience for students with a lens that asks, "Are we meeting the student's fullest potential?". I am eager to continue adjusting the provision of instruction and opportunities so that all our students get the education they need to thrive at their potential. I believe we can get there, and so I am working to return to the Board for a second term. Thank you.