



Mason District Candidate: Ricardy Anderson

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:

While Fairfax County Public Schools provides a range of services to help students transition from to post-school options, it's often a challenge for families to manage the complex maze of resources and organizations. The transition plan, a vital part of each student's Individual Education Program process, should comprehensively outline the steps necessary for students to achieve student postsecondary goals.

Ensuring opportunities and access to life skills training, affordable housing, financial planning, and transportation is paramount to facilitating independent living, personal goals and the sustained health of the county's economy. Many opportunities exist for the Fairfax County School Board to engage with county leaders in this area. There appears to be a natural bridge for part of this work to be aligned to efforts of the joint SCYPT committee's charter that includes support for youth to earn a post-secondary degree or career credential by coordinating planning and action among agencies.



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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:

Regardless of the grade level or discipline, teachers across FCPS consistently voice concerns regarding the workload. I have observed numerous intentional and strategic collaboration of staff in CLT's across the division that largely accomplish the same goal,.

However, there seems to be little notice that each of these groups often replicate efforts across our schools. FCPS is ripe with opportunity to evaluate the utility of its centrally developed materials to determine how to best develop resources to reduce teacher workload. I am particularly cognizant that special education teachers are required to create and/or modify plans for a number of grade levels with varying needs, and often lack parity in planning time compared to their general education colleagues. Given that the division currently maintains over 240 non-school based instructional support personnel, it stands to reason that efforts could be combined to support planning for special education teachers to reduce workload.

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



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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:

Fairfax County Public Schools has been implementing the Equitable Access to Literacy Plan to provide best-practice literacy instruction that follows the Science of Reading. The first stages of the plan focus on elementary instruction, particularly K-2. However, the use of such instructional strategies is intended for all students and should be supported by individualized interventions through the IEP for Students with Disabilities.

FCPS also offers a number of specialized reading programs which have been proven to be effective for students with dyslexia and both general educators and special educators have access to scheduled training opportunities on these specialized reading programs throughout the year. With the expansion of training and increased expectations for student outcomes, fidelity across all grades and settings will increase. The goals of the Strategic Plan and its embedded equity commitments mandate performance growth across all students groups, and will require plans for inclusion of secondary students who would have not have participated in early literacy interventions through the next phases of this initiative.



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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:

The teacher shortage is especially critical in hard to staff content areas such as special education. While I believe the division has developed various strategies for recruitment, additional commitments should be in place to retain staff. As noted, teacher burnout has been aggravated by an unyielding workload stemming from large caseloads and increasing student needs. I will continue to advocate for a review of the special education staffing formula and compensation plan. The current caseload assignment structure presents significant management challenges in daily operations and does not fully reflect the actual workload.

Recently, the Superintendent presented a status update regarding the OCR related compensatory work. I raised a concern in regards to the support provided by the division to teachers to complete this mammoth task. There is clearly some dissonance in perception as the Superintendent articulated a high level of support which has yet to be confirmed by staff. Moving forward, I will continue my long standing advocacy for differentiated compensation for teachers working in special education settings and in Title 1 schools to support recruitment and



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retention efforts. Lastly, there are many opportunities for the School Board to establish clearer expectations about supports to special education teachers.

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:

As a former teacher and school principal, I have a solid background in general and special education matters. I have received numerous trainings and engaged in special education coursework to satisfy requirements to achieve my undergraduate degree in elementary education.

Furthermore, over the course of 15 years, I have administered several self-contained programs and cross-categorical programs. I have worked collaboratively with families and teachers to develop numerous IEPs and supported staff in the process of data collection leading to the creation of progress reports.

However, as a current non-practitioner, I continue to seek opportunities to remain informed and current on all educational issues - not only to support in my role on the school board, but because K-12 education is my chosen career field in which I have spent nearly 25 years.