



## **Dranesville District Candidate: Robyn Lady**

# **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:**

**To do this well, we need money, expanded housing options, more service providers, and more practitioners. As we all know, our state government does not offer the financial support to develop the services needed and streamline this process. Virginia does not offer a core services waiver leaving families with the financial burden of helping their adult children get both jobs and independent living coaching. While this is not the responsibility of the school board, as an educator, citizen, and board member, I care deeply about this topic.**

**Unemployment for people with disabilities in 2022 was more than double that for people without disabilities. Fairfax County Public Schools has great programs for our SPED students up until their 23rd birthday. We also need a strong transition program and services in place for when young adults exit our programs. Students need more skilled vocational training that leads to actual job placement. Too often when these young adults' interview for jobs the employer only sees the disability and misses their actual abilities. I would like our schools to help students develop a video resume demonstrating their skills in action. We could work with our Broadcast Journalism students to take and edit the videos. This in turn will help change the assumptions and mindsets about people with disabilities.**



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**When elected I will advocate with county and state officials for more funding for waiver slots, more providers, and more trained practitioners. I will also work to ensure that FCPS implements the JLARK recommendations and write appropriate transition IEP's and improve transition services. In addition, I will advocate for a review of our workforce development and postgraduate program; Davis, Pulley, and STEP to determine if we need to make any changes and to create similar programs at more high schools.**

### **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:**

**As the Director of Student Services at Chantilly High School I was charged with building the master schedule. Every year I worked with my Principal and Special Education Assistant Principal to petition for more SPED staffing. Our numbers (IEP hours) consistently required more teachers than we were allocated. Often, we were denied and found ourselves loading self-contained classes higher than appropriate and seeing the percentage of SPED to Gen Ed numbers not consistent with recommendations in Teamed Taught classes. My experience with managing SPED staffing shortages has made me keenly aware of the impact this has on curriculum development and student outcomes.**

**I agree that FCPS should hire educators dedicated to ongoing curriculum development and resources to support SPED teachers. They currently hire teachers to do this during their summer, which is not enough. While this is**



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**operational in nature and not under the purview of the board, outside of developing the budget, I understand the issue and the added burden placed on classroom teachers. The current Special Education Enhancement Plan will work to structure instruction across all grade levels. I was told that there are new virtual tools for equitable access to literacy. It is nice to see FCPS moving in the right direction, but we must continue to focus our efforts in this area**

### **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 am incredibly pleased that FCPS leaned into learning more about the Science of Reading and began training teachers in 2021. Their equitably access to literacy plan provides Tier 1 instruction in phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing. In 2022-2023, K-6 students started receiving instruction in grade level word recognition skills and Lexia implementation and K-2 began using decodables and skills based small group instruction. During the**



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**Academic Matters presentation at the school board meeting in September, Dr. Reid shared that this plan is meeting with great success.**

**[https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/CVWS436ED9B7/\\$file/Academic%20Matters%20EAL%20Update\\_Sept\\_28\\_2023.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/CVWS436ED9B7/$file/Academic%20Matters%20EAL%20Update_Sept_28_2023.pdf)**

**All our students must receive strong literacy instruction to continue to close achievement gaps. Our Tier 1 efforts should reach all students and when students are behind, we need to implement Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction by name by need. This has been a struggle in the past because we lack the staffing needed to do this effectively. On October 5, 2023, Governor Youngkin announced that the state budget is allocating \$152 million toward school support staff. I hope that FCPS will tap into this money quickly, recruit and hire great people, and have the latitude to drill down on literacy gaps K-12. Our teachers are burdened with too many additional tasks, and we need to put the focus back on teaching. The additional support staff should make it easier for all teachers to receive training in the Science of Reading and support literacy at all levels. We must also ensure this instruction is taking place in self-contained, small group classrooms. Finally, we will need to be creative and deliberate with the flex period in middle and high school to accommodate students who need daily literacy instruction.**

**While addressing the current literacy learning gaps, we must also think about the future and provide Pre-K for every family who cannot afford it. I will collaborate with my school board colleagues and the board of supervisors to make this a priority. While funding is a major obstacle, as a school board member, I will work to ensure that renovated schools add additional Pre-K classroom space, which is not happening right now. The renovation of Herndon Elementary is set to start in 2024 and it has two Pre-K classrooms now and there are only two included in the renovation. That school will open over capacity which makes no sense. We must do better.**



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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:**

**We are absolutely dealing with a shortage of special education professionals at a severe level And, we are hiring too many SPED teachers who have not been trained to do this work. While provisional licenses help ensure a teacher in every classroom, these folks are learning a job that requires of them far more than they expected. The daily grind of planning, teaching, managing behavior, ensuring accommodations are provided, attending IEP's meetings, and writing plans, responding to demanding parents, etc. is indeed a recipe for burnout. This is a national issue, and we need help from the state and national government to encourage and provide financial support to people who want to enter the profession. This could be done through loan forgiveness or offering free tuition in return for working five years as a teacher in one of our public schools. We should consider signing bonuses and retention bonuses. Most importantly we need the federal government to fully fund IDEA to ensure all schools provide special education services as required by the law. Unfounded mandates put an undue burden on taxpayers and local school systems.**



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**When creating caseloads, we need to evaluate time and workload versus a set number of students assigned per teacher. We also need to try and keep students with the same case manager year to year. Building relationships, understanding student needs, writing IEP goals, and developing appropriate accommodations takes time. Once in place, we should support those relationships year after year. As indicated in the previous answer, we need to evaluate staffing models, program delivery, and allocate more funding as needed. This includes support positions (ABA coaches, psychologists, social workers, crisis intervention teachers, IA's, etc.). We also need to better train general education teachers to read IEP's, understand accommodations, how to implement them with fidelity, and the pyramid of other resources in FCPS.**

**We must invest time, energy, and resources to recruit and hire an exceptional and diverse workforce. This requires administrators and Central Office staff to travel to job fairs at colleges and universities both in and out of state. We cannot continue to open schools with long-term substitute teachers. Once hired, we need to ensure that our onboarding process is culturally responsive and a pleasant experience. Fairfax County is huge and too often new employees feel like a number and struggle to get answers to their questions. We should survey new employees three to six months into the job for feedback on their transition and recommendations that would make their onboarding experience better.**

**Most importantly, Fairfax County must pay our employees better while also continuing to provide them with outstanding benefits. Collective Bargaining will help achieve this goal. Great applicants pass on our offers because our salaries need to be more competitive.**

### **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?**



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### **Response:**

**As a former school counselor and Director of Student Services I am well educated on special education, disability, and accessibility issues in FCPS. I have attended Local Screening and IEP meetings throughout my tenure as an educator. I believe in least restrictive environments and mainstreaming students when appropriate. While I have not been part of any policy conversations, I know my knowledge and experience will allow me to offer insight to these conversations. Once on the board, I will maintain communication with FCPS faculty and staff, other board members, and parents to ensure that I learn all that I can about Special Education.**