



Springfield District Candidate: Sandra (Sandy) 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 post-graduate planning for all students is essential to our graduates' success, planning for our SWD graduates presents a significant level of complexity that is not understood by many outside the disability community. I am just learning about the intricacies of this task for parents and students. It is abundantly clear that this is not a problem that can be solved without strong partnerships between the list of organizations included above: FCPS, local and state government agencies, and a variety of other public and private entities.

The truth is that although what happens after graduation is not solely the responsibility of the division or the school board, there is so much that can be done before students leave our schools that is in our purview. Here are a two of my ideas:

1. I would like to examine the work that has likely already been done to consider something like a community school approach, and all the funding available with it, for SWD that gives students and families a way to access the available wraparound services that can facilitate the planning process for each student's



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unique circumstances. This assumes that these services exist within local and state agencies and that access is the major concern, which I know is not necessarily the case. However, creating more visibility for services that do exist is a place to start.

2. Vocational training opportunities are important for all FCPS students. As a former educator that was in the college classroom for over a decade, I have seen first-hand that college isn't the right fit for every student. FCPS can and absolutely should ensure that vast vocational offerings are available by creating partnerships with local businesses and working with students to determine areas of interest. Students with disabilities and their families must be included in these discussions to ensure the availability of offerings that meet their needs and interests as well!

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:

One of the first questions I asked during the process of learning more about the needs of our students with disabilities was about how resources are shared throughout the county. I was surprised to hear that while some specialized trainings are available to staff and teachers, there isn't dedicated staff that can help ensure adequate access to the technologies, curriculum, and resources needed for our SWD to thrive. I believe curriculum specialists for SWD populations would absolutely help to support teachers and staff.



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Honestly, I believe working together in a more deliberate manner across a multitude of aspects of instruction in Fairfax County would create a community of learners amongst our staff as well. Learning together helps everyone feel supported. For SWD students, resource depositories could be created, or added to, that give teachers a place to start when creating and adapting curriculum materials. While these wouldn't likely be cookie cutter solutions, the resources could provide valuable modeling that would allow for easier adaption.

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:

If Science of Reading has been determined to be the best, most current, evidenced-based approach to ensure literacy, and our goal is to ensure all our students have the strongest literacy outcomes, then of course our Equitable Access for Literacy Plan must absolutely be shaped to include ALL our students. Several of the state resources I located about intervention said that approved



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MTSS programs won't be released until 2024. I would like to know more about other barriers to success are at the state and local levels.

As new Science of Reading approaches are implemented throughout the county, FCPS will also need to ensure those students that have passed initial K-2 opportunities are provided additional intervention strategies appropriate to their grade and skill levels. As a parent of a middle schooler, our students do have intervention time available in their learning seminar block that could be utilized for this type of instruction. Daily instruction would likely be possible as well with some creative reworking of scheduling constraints. It seems logical that this type of dedicated instruction could be handled much like an elective that would be varying in length (semester or yearlong) depending on the type of intervention needed.

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:

I know our special education staff are particularly at risk related to burnout, and teacher and staff retention is one of my most significant areas of concern for



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FCPS. Increased staff compensation is always going to be one goal to ensure retention, but more money isn't necessarily going to ensure our teachers stay without more discussions about the source of the burnout. Having better paid, burnt out teachers cannot be our sole goal.

From what I have already heard, there are a multitude of factors outside pay that will need to be addressed including administrative task load and increased parent demands. The newly elected board will have to immediately address staffing issues, and I would love to see us adapt the "stay" interview process utilized by the Fairfax County Health Department as a place to start these conversations.

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 am learning that most people uncover information about special education when they have a child that receives a diagnosis, and parents then seek out resources to help their kids. At this time, I do not have a child that has been identified as a student with a disability, so I knew from the beginning this was an area that I needed to seek out more information about. I am excited to learn what it will look like to support ALL our students, and I have already been actively pursuing information from a multitude of arenas related to the special education community.

The other thing that I have learned throughout my campaign is that I do not have to be an expert on everything. In our rich community, we have experts doing this essential work, and from what I can tell so far, they need support. I need to be curious and ready to learn how to advocate for our SWD while listening to those experts. I stand eager and prepared to do so. I plan to continue to cultivate the connections I have already made as well as seek out others to continue to learn what I need to learn to be a strong advocate for our students with disabilities.



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I would also like to say that I believe in FCPS. I am not coming into this position with rose colored glasses that diminish our problems. I know that we have work to do to ensure our students are all being treated equitably and with the resources each needs. Answers to long standing problems often appear when we have creative problem solvers that are not stuck in business-as-usual approaches. This is one of the strongest skillsets I believe I bring with me to this position.