



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

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.



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

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:

Transitioning from secondary school to post-secondary independence is an intricate journey for students with disabilities, necessitating a well-coordinated effort among various stakeholders. In Fairfax County, where there is a noticeable scarcity of accessible resources and services for these students, it becomes imperative to adopt a comprehensive approach to address this pressing issue. My strategy will involve establishing strong collaborative ties with Fairfax County government leadership and other relevant agencies to allocate resources effectively with regular dialogues, meetings, and open communication channels. Also, I would initiate a thorough assessment of the distinct transition needs of students with disabilities in the county. Gathering input from parents, students, educators, and experts would help us pinpoint gaps and prioritize areas that need immediate attention.

I would work diligently to advocate for increased funding that supports the development of transition services and resources. This advocacy would extend to local and state government officials, underscoring the importance of investing in services such as employment training programs, affordable housing, financial planning assistance, and accessible transportation options. Collaborating with public and private entities would also be paramount by partnering with



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

organizations, businesses, and community groups, we can create a more diverse range of opportunities, including job training, internships, and other post-secondary programs tailored to the unique needs of these students.

By enhancing college and career guidance within secondary schools and offering comprehensive life skills education, we can better prepare students with disabilities for post-secondary life. Ensuring accessible transportation options is essential, and I would advocate for improved transportation services that cater to the needs of individuals with disabilities, enabling them to access employment and educational opportunities.

Addressing the issue of affordable housing for students with disabilities transitioning into independent living would be a key focus.

This multifaceted strategy aims to create a more streamlined and comprehensive transition process for students with disabilities in Fairfax County. By fostering collaboration, prioritizing funding, and developing services that support their post-secondary success, including employment opportunities, life skills, affordable housing, financial planning, and accessible transportation, we can empower these students to achieve their full potential and thrive in independent living beyond their secondary education.

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:

Addressing the staffing inequity between Instructional Services and the Department of Special Services (DSS) concerning special education curriculum development is a pivotal step in ensuring that all students, including those with



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

disabilities, receive equitable and high-quality education. To initiate this process, a thorough assessment of the specific curriculum and resource development needs within DSS is essential. This assessment would be conducted through close collaboration with special education teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders, enabling us to identify gaps and prioritize areas for improvement. It is crucial to advocate for additional permanent funding within the budget to hire specialized staff dedicated to developing special education curriculum and resources.

Moreover, collaboration between Instructional Services and DSS is imperative. This collaboration would facilitate the exchange of expertise and best practices. To empower special education teachers in curriculum development, ongoing professional development opportunities would be provided to enhance their skills, ensuring their ability to create effective curricula even when external support is available.

Throughout these initiatives, equity considerations would remain most important, ensuring fair distribution of resources and support across all schools and settings within FCPS. Any existing disparities would be proactively addressed. These comprehensive steps collectively work towards eliminating staffing inequities, supporting dedicated staff for special education curriculum development, and ultimately providing a consistent, equitable, and effective educational experience for all special education students, all while alleviating the high workload often placed on special education teachers.

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



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

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:

The implementation of FCPS's Equitable Access to Literacy Plan represents a significant stride towards the adoption of evidence-based literacy instruction founded on the Science of Reading. However, it has become clear that a more thorough approach is necessary to ensure that this methodology reaches all students, including those with disabilities in various educational settings. My commitment involves expanding the equitable access to literacy plan to encompass not only elementary grades but also upper elementary and secondary schools, addressing the essential need for best-practice literacy instruction throughout the educational continuum. This initiative will extend to self-contained Cat B settings and gifted programs, with the goal of providing tailored literacy support to all students. Additionally, I will focus on comprehensive professional development for educators, resource assessment, flexible scheduling options, data-driven decision-making, community engagement, equity considerations, interdisciplinary collaboration, and ongoing assessment to ensure that students with disabilities, ranging from those in self-contained Cat B placements to twice-exceptional gifted students, consistently receive evidence-based literacy instruction with fidelity, and that appropriate Tier 3 interventions are readily available when necessary.

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



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

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 national teacher shortage, particularly in the realm of special education, poses a pressing concern for FCPS. Staff feedback has underscored the serious issue of burnout among special education staff, attributed to various factors. Among these, the practice of assigning caseloads based on headcount, as opposed to IEP service hours, has led to disparities in workload distribution and, consequently, students not receiving the full extent of services they require. To address these challenges, I am committed to implementing measures aimed at supporting and retaining school-based special education staff, as well as attracting new professionals to FCPS, thereby addressing the long-standing national shortage of special education staff. These measures include equitable caseload assignments, job description reviews, additional support for compliance work, mental health and wellness programs, opportunities for professional development and career advancement, collaboration with universities, retention initiatives, and increase in community engagement. Through these actions, I would like to create a nurturing, equitable, and inclusive environment within FCPS for special education professionals to thrive and serve our students effectively.



Sully District Candidate: Seema Dixit

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 parent of a child with ADHD and Anxiety, I've gained valuable insights into the unique perspective and behaviors of twice-exceptional children. Managing poor executive functioning presents a significant hurdle for these kids, especially in school environments with heavy homework loads and strict deadlines.

Throughout my son's educational journey, he faced consistent challenges, and despite having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) during his high school years, it didn't provide the necessary support.

My firsthand experience has deepened my empathy for parents grappling with the frustration and concern that arises when their children struggle academically, leading to declining grades due to assignments and group projects. I am eager to contribute to the betterment of students with special needs, leveraging my understanding and compassion to make a meaningful impact in their lives.