



## Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman

# 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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## Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman

### **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:**

**Unfortunately, a lack of accessible and equitable resources and services for our students with disabilities does not only affect our students here in Fairfax County, it is a problem nationwide. We can begin to address this problem here in Fairfax County by making sure that funding is being appropriately disseminated and reaching the students not only in their classrooms but also in their homes and communities. One of the most important aspects of helping students with special needs transition from secondary school into post-secondary independence is to make sure that we begin with the end in mind. If the end goal is to turn out educated, capable, and employable students, then transition planning is how we must start. In order for a successful transition to take place, the students have to play an important role in the planning process from start to finish. Even though the idea of transition seems simple, the logistics of carrying out the process can be quite overwhelming when one tries to balance a combination of educational and social services. With this end goal in mind, FCPS must collaborate and partner with county leadership as well as local employers and institutions of higher learning to make them aware of the crucial part they play in helping ensure the successful transition of our special needs students from secondary school**



## **Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman**

**into their post-secondary lives and beyond. In order to ensure this takes place, my plans would include extensive collaboration and focus groups between parents, families, students, staff, and the community to not only bring about awareness of available resources but to make the ease of access to those resources more readily available to the over 27,000 families that have a student with a disability in Fairfax County Public Schools.**

**My plans for collaboration with Fairfax County government leadership and other agencies involve the following key strategies:**

- 1. Establishing Interagency Partnerships: Forge strong partnerships with Fairfax County government agencies, community organizations, and non-profits dedicated to supporting individuals with disabilities. Collaborate on joint initiatives to streamline the transition process and enhance the availability of resources and services.**
  
- 2. Advocacy for Funding: Advocate for increased funding at both the local and state levels to prioritize the development of services for post-secondary students with disabilities. This includes securing resources for employment and life skills bridging programs, affordable housing initiatives, financial planning support, and accessible transportation options.**
  
- 3. Coordination of Services: Work closely with relevant stakeholders to ensure better coordination of existing services and resources. Streamlining communication and collaboration between agencies can enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of transition services for students with disabilities.**
  
- 4. Development of Comprehensive Programs: Collaborate with county leaders and agencies to develop comprehensive programs that address the diverse needs of SWD. This may involve creating employment training programs, fostering professional internships, and providing college and career guidance tailored to the unique abilities and challenges of individuals with disabilities.**
  
- 5. Affordable Housing Initiatives: Advocate for and support initiatives that focus on affordable and accessible housing for individuals with disabilities. Collaborate**



## **Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman**

with housing authorities and organizations to develop housing options that cater to the specific needs of post-secondary students with disabilities.

**6. Transportation Accessibility:** Work with transportation authorities to improve the accessibility of public transportation options for individuals with disabilities. This could involve advocating for better infrastructure, accommodations, and specialized transportation services.

**7. Community Engagement:** Foster community engagement and awareness programs to garner support for the needs of post-secondary students with disabilities. Building a community that understands and values the inclusion and support of individuals with disabilities is essential for long-term success.

**8. Regular Assessments and Adjustments:** Establish a system for regular assessments of the effectiveness of transition services. Based on feedback and outcomes, make necessary adjustments to continually improve and refine the support provided to post-secondary students with disabilities.

Through these collaborative efforts, the goal is to create a seamless and supportive transition process for students with disabilities. This approach ensures that the community is actively involved in creating an inclusive and empowering environment for post-secondary students with disabilities.

### **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?*



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## Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman

### **Response:**

Addressing the staffing imbalance in curriculum development between Instructional Services (general education) and the Department of Special Services (DSS) is crucial for ensuring a fair and effective educational system. To rectify this imbalance, I propose advocating for a more equitable allocation of resources, including dedicated staff within the DSS specifically assigned to ongoing curriculum development for special education. While efforts have been made in the past decade to integrate siloed operations of departments like Language Arts, Title I, English Language Learning (ELL), and Special Education (SPED), these attempts often fall short. For instance, there are teacher resources for SPED housed in the Office of School Improvement and the Equity Office. We need a thorough review of the SPED resources available throughout FCPS to avoid redundancy in staffing and ensure an efficient allocation of resources. If warranted, I would support additional permanent funding in the budget to hire professionals with expertise in special education curriculum design and resources. Investing in specialized staff for the DSS is crucial to alleviating the burden on individual teachers and schools. This targeted approach aims to promote consistency, fidelity, and a more manageable workload for special education educators, who often grapple with the challenge of teaching multiple grade levels in a single classroom. By adopting a multi-faceted strategy, we can ensure that the unique needs of special education students receive the same level of dedication and expertise as their counterparts in general education.

### **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.



## Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman

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:**

**Literacy must be our number one priority and is the fundamental foundation of my platform. Right now, with the release of the recent SOL scores along with testing data from VDOE and from the National Assessment of Educational Progress, nearly two-thirds of FCPS students struggle to read proficiently at grade level. In 2021, the NAACP pleaded with FCPS to implement a vetted, research-based literacy curriculum, implemented with fidelity, utilizing the five pillars of literacy learning: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Unfortunately, even with the adoption of Lexia, implementation has been haphazard at best as there are disparities in literacy instruction, resources, interventions, and accommodations among schools and even within the same school. Administrators, teachers, and support staff bridging all student populations lack the necessary training and resources for effective curriculum implementation. The Board and central office administrators at Gatehouse appear more focused on expanding Gatehouse and committees than on prioritizing students and learning. Until this focus shifts, learning gaps will persist, disproportionately affecting our SWD, ESL, ED, and individuals experiencing homelessness.**

**A concerted effort is needed to leverage data, particularly from assessments like I-Ready, to gain valuable insights into students' reading abilities. Observation has shown that these assessments, when properly utilized, provide comprehensive information about phonics and phonemic awareness gaps. One challenge, however, is that this data often tends to be disregarded, especially if students are performing at or above average in their classwork. In the past, a pilot attached to**



## **Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman**

**the I-Ready assessment successfully matched interventions based on students' scores, leading to notable improvements, particularly with targeted computerized interventions. While I understand that computerized intervention is not a panacea, it becomes crucial when teachers lack the qualifications for effective literacy instruction.**

**It is important that we explore various avenues, including computerized interventions, to address literacy challenges effectively. By examining data, we can identify the extent of gaps, whether it's a 20%, 40%, or more gap in phonemic awareness skills. States like Mississippi have seen success with extensive literacy training, such as LETRS training. Currently, only reading teachers and, in some cases, groups in Title I schools receive this intensive literacy training. I believe that expanding such training to all teachers from kindergarten through eighth grade is essential to ensuring a comprehensive and effective literacy education for all students.**

**Addressing the disparities in literacy instruction for students with disabilities is imperative for fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment. To ensure that all students, including those in self-contained Cat B settings and twice-exceptional gifted students, receive evidence-based literacy instruction with fidelity, I propose a comprehensive approach:**

- 1. Inclusive Literacy Plans: Develop explicit, consistent, county-wide plans that extend the Equitable Access to Literacy initiative to students with disabilities in self-contained settings. This involves tailoring literacy programs to meet the diverse needs of students across placements.**
- 2. Upper Elementary and Secondary Focus: Extend the Science of Reading-based literacy instruction to upper elementary and secondary levels, recognizing the importance of addressing missed critical instruction. Implement consistent literacy plans across schools and within schools, ensuring continuity in best-practice literacy strategies.**
- 3. Customized Interventions: Address the lack of appropriate Tier 3 literacy interventions for all ages by investing in evidence-based intervention practices**



## **Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman**

**tailored to individual needs. Provide resources and training to educators to effectively implement these interventions.**

**4. Flexible Scheduling: Acknowledge the challenges posed by block scheduling in secondary schools and work towards a more flexible schedule that accommodates daily instruction, particularly for evidence-based interventions. This may involve a collaborative effort with school administrators to explore and implement scheduling adjustments.**

**5. Professional Development: Provide ongoing professional development for educators, including those in special education, to ensure they are well-versed in evidence-based literacy practices and can implement them effectively.**

**6. Continuous Monitoring and Support: Establish a system for continuous monitoring of literacy instruction across all levels and placements. Offer support and resources to teachers and schools to maintain fidelity in implementing evidence-based practices.**

**7. Stakeholder Collaboration: Foster collaboration between educators, administrators, parents, and specialists to create a supportive network for students with disabilities. Ensure that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are aligned with evidence-based literacy instruction and that parents are informed and engaged in their child's literacy development.**

**By prioritizing these measures, we can create a more inclusive and effective literacy instruction framework that caters to the diverse needs of all students, including those with disabilities, fostering a culture of equitable learning opportunities.**

### **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





## Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman

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 staffing models in FCPS are antiquated at best and are saddling our special educators with caseloads that typically run in the range of 20-25 students.**

**Teachers normally love what they do, but burnout is a real problem and often stems from a lack of support in the classroom. Without the support of IA's and with high caseloads, teachers' workloads become overwhelming. Addressing the challenges faced by special education staff is crucial to ensuring a supportive and sustainable work environment.**

**To support and retain school-based special education staff in FCPS and attract new professionals, I propose an all-around approach:**

**1. Caseload Management Reform: Review and reform the caseload assignment system to ensure equitable distribution based on both headcount and IEP service hours. This will prevent caseload inequities and ensure that students receive the appropriate services and support.**

**2. Contract Alignment: Ensure that special education chairs and staff are not burdened with caseloads and instructional hours beyond their contracted job description. Clearly define roles and responsibilities, and provide additional support or resources where necessary to alleviate excessive workloads.**



## **Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman**

**3. Compensation and Recognition: Recognize the additional efforts of special education staff, especially those involved in situations like the OCR agreement for Covid compensatory services. Consider offering additional compensation or recognition for the extra hours and stress associated with such responsibilities.**

**4. Professional Development and Training: Provide ongoing professional development and training to equip special education staff with the skills and resources needed to navigate complex situations, such as those arising from OCR agreements or other challenges related to the pandemic.**

**5. Mental Health and Well-being Programs: Implement programs focused on mental health and well-being, including counseling services and stress management resources. Create a culture that prioritizes the emotional and physical health of special education staff.**

**6. Streamlined Administrative Processes: Streamline administrative processes related to compensatory services or other special education responsibilities to reduce unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, minimizing stress and workload for staff.**

**7. Collaboration and Communication: Foster open communication and collaboration between special education staff and central office administration. Ensure that staff feel supported, heard, and respected, particularly during challenging situations.**

**8. Recruitment Strategies: Develop targeted recruitment strategies to attract special education professionals to FCPS. This may include competitive compensation packages, signing bonuses, mentorship programs, and partnerships with local universities for a pipeline of new talent.**

**9. Flexible Work Arrangements: Explore and implement flexible work arrangements where feasible, accommodating the unique needs and circumstances of special education staff, which can contribute to a healthier work-life balance.**



## **Mount Vernon District Candidate: Stori Zimmerman**

**By implementing these measures, FCPS can create an environment that supports the well-being of special education staff, mitigates burnout, and attracts new professionals to address the ongoing national shortage in special education. It's crucial to prioritize the physical and emotional health of these educators to ensure the best outcomes for both staff and students.**

### **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 bring a foundation of awareness and respect for the challenges faced by individuals in special education and while my direct experience with special education is limited, I am committed to bridging any knowledge gaps before making policy decisions that impact this population. This may involve but is not limited to engaging with experts, consulting with educators, parents, and advocacy groups, attending relevant workshops, and staying informed about the latest research and best practices. Prior to making policy decisions impacting the special education population, I will prioritize listening to the diverse voices within the community and work closely with those directly involved to ensure informed, inclusive, and effective policies.**