

October 5th, 2020

To the South Orange-Maplewood Community,

We are pleased to share with you these 2020 Board of Education candidate statements on special education. We thank all the candidates for taking the time to share their perspectives. The Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) is not a political organization, and it does not endorse candidates in any election. This presentation is intended solely to assist voters by presenting candidate views on issues related to special education. The views expressed herein are the candidates' own.

The candidates were invited to provide written statements in the form of responses to four questions.

- 1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience regarding special education?**
- 2. How will you help the Administration prioritize and improve special education services within the district schools?**
- 3. Given that the district is all virtual due to COVID-19, how should the Administration work to accommodate the needs of Special education students and make sure IEP and 504 plans are implemented as completely as possible?**
- 4. What considerations should be made for special education students as it pertains to the district's Intentional Integration Plan?**

The below responses are presented in alphabetical order by candidate last name. We encourage you to reach out to individual candidates with any questions regarding their responses, and we encourage you to share this presentation with community members who might have an interest in special education. An electronic copy will be available on SEPAC's website at <http://sepacsoma.org/>.

Please visit the website to learn more about special education in SOMA and to sign up to receive regular notices of SEPAC meetings and activities.

But most importantly, we encourage all eligible voters to get out and vote as early as possible.

Susan Bergin

1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience regarding special education?

I have special education experience and training as an advocate/attorney and am also the parent of a child with an IEP. I served as a Court Appointed Special Advocate, or a CASA, for youth in foster care in Essex County. As a CASA, I advocated for the special needs children on my caseload with their schools. As a lawyer, I have attended training at the Education Law Center on advocating for children with special needs and have attended many hours of online continuing legal education on special education. As a legal services lawyer, I represented children and adults in disability benefits hearings (such as SSI). My personal experience as a parent includes advocating for IEP and 504 plans for my children and for their thorough and effective implementation each year. I know what it is like to be a parent in this District advocating for children with learning differences.

2. How will you help the Administration prioritize and improve special education services within the district schools?

I have been actively engaged volunteering in the District for years. With this work, I have tried to help make our schools a place where all students are included and all students get what they need, whether their needs are related to a disability, financial or otherwise. For example, in 2018, I advocated for the Board to enact a legally mandated policy on food allergy management, then worked with the District to draft implementing regulations. My goal was not only to make our schools safer for students with food allergies, but also to ensure all students are fully included in classrooms and school activities regardless of disability. As a Board member, I would continue to apply this core value to advocate for all students with special needs.

As a Board member, I would support the District in making the Intervention and Referral Service and the Child Study Team evaluation process more collaborative and effective. The process is an opportunity for real intervention, to make sure students get the individualized services and accommodations they need to thrive. I would also work to increase participation of students with IEPs in AP and honors courses. One important step is putting a support teacher in all these courses (currently not all AP courses have a support teacher). Students with IEPs should have the same options as all the other students. Because paraprofessionals are a vital part of the team supporting our students, I support paraprofessionals rejoining the District if possible or finding other ways to integrate paraprofessionals into the district to improve continuity.

3. Given that the district is all virtual due to COVID-19, how should the Administration work to accommodate the needs of Special education students and make sure IEP and 504 plans are implemented as completely as possible?

To say that students with special needs have had a particularly difficult time with distance learning is an understatement. Students and families have really suffered since schools closed, with virtual school and the resulting disruption to their services and accommodations. We need to meet students where they are at, in the virtual classroom as we would in person.

Accommodations must be transformed into their virtual counterparts. Understood, an on-line resource about learning differences for families and educators, has a useful chart on adapting accommodations to the virtual realm.

(https://www.understood.org/en/school-learning/for-educators/learning-and-thinking-differences-basics/iep-accommodations-during-distance-learning?_ul=1*1yi2oe2*domain_userid*YW1wLU81V2ZHVGVDSW9jOV91V2Zab3JKYVE). While every single accommodation cannot be implemented virtually exactly as written in the IEP (for example, class duration has changed), the District must be held accountable and fulfill its legal obligations to our special needs students under their IEPs and 504 plans.

The District should develop best practices for using technology to support IEP and 504 plans. I would also seek input from all participants -- teachers, paraprofessionals, students and parents -- to cull successful use of technology for virtual support (e.g., google chat or split screen video with paraprofessionals during virtual class). In the afternoons, students with IEPs and 504s need regular check ins with their support teacher(s) or paraprofessional. We also need greater consistency using the Canvas platform and presenting links to synchronous classes in the same manner across courses.

Special education should be front and center as we work to recover from the pandemic, with students receiving compensatory services as we reopen. We need to prioritize the useable school space that is currently available for (1) providing in person services (OT, PT, speech) to as many students with IEPs as we can; (2) conducting child study team evaluations to work through the backlog from the spring school closure; and (3) providing in person instruction to students with the greatest special needs (starting with those in self-contained classrooms) and ELL (English Language Learners). I also would have liked to see social skills groups and weekly check-ins outdoors in the fall, while we can before winter arrives. Students with special needs should have the most access to in-person instruction as we reopen. Child Study Teams can continue to hold virtual IEP and 504 meetings. Some students are suffering without the social interaction of school, while others are thriving at home without the anxiety experienced at school. Families who are high risk or otherwise do not want in person services or instruction should be able to decline them without repercussions.

4. What considerations should be made for special education students as it pertains to the district's Intentional Integration Plan?

The facilities plan includes making only one elementary school and one middle school ADA compliant. I appreciate the financial constraints, but it is not my preference; putting all students with a physical disability in one elementary school is not the least restrictive environment and sends the wrong message (not to mention disabled parents and teachers not being able to access the other schools). I would like the Board to address accessibility at all our schools.

Because the District's Intentional Elementary Integration Plan will be implemented gradually, starting with kindergarteners, and does not involve students in grades 1-5 changing schools, it should not affect continuity of services for students with special needs. Every elementary school in this District should be able to serve any student with special needs. But if one school has an enhanced capacity to educate a student with a particular set of needs, of course that student should be able to attend the school that can meet those needs.

Deborah Engel

1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience regarding special education?

I have three children in our district and while we don't have an IEP or 504, I have several close friends who have gone through the process and I have listened, learned and empathized while supporting them. This is one of the reasons why I have weekly office hours. As your Board of Education member, I want to hear your stories and understand your experiences better to make a stronger education program for everyone. We parents are all in this together. We all need to support each other as we all want what is best for all our children in the district.

2. How will you help the Administration prioritize and improve special education services within the district schools?

It is the Board of Education's duty to ensure every student in our district has access to free, equitable and quality education, and that includes the most vulnerable of our students, our special education students. These students should never be an afterthought. They should have equal weight at the table whenever the district considers any new programs or initiatives. If I am elected as your Board of Education representative, I would look out for the needs of all students and make sure that the district upholds a policy of ensuring that no one is left behind.

To start, we need to prioritize the idea that every child deserves an equal chance for a quality education, even if it needs to be delivered in a different way. Our special education students require us to think out of the box and to come up with creative solutions. Education is not a one-size-fits-all model, especially during a time of at-home virtual learning.

As well, communication channels in all areas of this district need to be improved, and that includes special education. We need to improve communication lines between the special services department and parents, and we also need to improve communications between the administration, case workers and teachers.

Finally, the best way that I can improve special education services as a member of the BOE is to support the budget requests put forth by the Special Services Department. I would be open to bringing the employment of paraprofessionals back into the district. I would also welcome any additional personnel we can add to our district's roster, such as an additional BCBA. And, I

would support professional development opportunities that the district can offer to Special Education teachers, paraprofessionals and building administrators, especially regarding restorative justice practices.

3. Given that the district is all virtual due to COVID-19, how should the Administration work to accommodate the needs of Special education students and make sure IEP and 504 plans are implemented as completely as possible?

First and foremost, the district needs to prioritize bringing special education students back into the classroom, as we all know many of the services needed cannot be done virtually.

That said, not every child has a situation where coming back into the classroom is possible, and different children have different needs. Again, we need to recognize and acknowledge these differences, and accommodate each child and their IEPs in an individual yet consistent and equitable way.

The district needs to provide families and teachers with more guidance on how to implement modifications in a virtual setting, and the district needs to be more amenable to creating different kinds of learning environments to have those needs met. There also needs to be more flexibility and clear communications to the teachers that this kind of differentiation is not only okay, but critical for the success of each child.

Instead of relying on each individual parent to come up with their own solutions and advocate separately with each individual teacher, our district should be out front with solutions, suggestions and support. It is our administration's responsibility to ensure that each child is getting what they need to succeed. Let's not create further inconsistencies, inequities and an added burden to teachers and parents.

Regular communication from the district via tip sheets, guidance and suggestions - from lessons learned in our virtual classrooms - would be helpful to parents who are struggling with their children in our current experience. We cannot ignore the heartbreaking comments made by numerous special education families at the September BOE meeting; our children and parents are struggling and regressing. Parents need more support and empathy.

4. What considerations should be made for special education students as it pertains to the district's Intentional Integration Plan?

The intentional integration plan must prioritize special education students during implementation. Many schools in our district have specialized classes such as self-contained classrooms, ABA classrooms and more. Organizing where these classes are held and ensuring that the students (and their siblings) who need these services are placed appropriately is imperative. We cannot have these placements reevaluated and changed at the last minute, or even year to year. We should ensure that our special education children can remain in the same school and with the same school community year after year and not be shuffled around.

The district should be integrating our classrooms; our schools should resemble the demographics of our community. However, priority must be given to these specialized classes and the children who require them. It should not be a last-minute consideration, but should be considered front and center.

As well, redistricting children amongst different schools could offer an opportunity to change how our children are assigned to case managers. Instead of having a different case manager for every building, which allows for unnecessary transitions should a child switch schools, as your Board of Education member, I would welcome conversation around assigning one case manager per student for their entire elementary school years.

Melanie Finnern

I want to share with you a statement I have prepared in lieu of answering each question independent of one another. I'm sure that every single member of SEPAC understands more than most that time is precious at the moment. The overall message I'd like to get across is that I truly believe our school district needs to work harder to support your children.

From all the hours I have spent speaking with SEPAC families and those involved in your cause, I see how your children are being underserved and that is not acceptable. The district had an opportunity this summer to figure out a way to bring your kids safely back inside school buildings. This should have been a main concern, but the fact that your children are at home on screens everyday is a reminder that we need a change in our priorities.

I believe that an issue on our current Board is that they are forgetting what their primary responsibility is — that is the achievement of ALL children in this district. Rather than keeping your paraprofessionals in the district, we have outsourced this crucial job and sacrificed the well being of our special education community. Rather than working to serve your children in our schools, we are spending an unconscionable amount of money sending them to schools out of district where they can be better served.

We need a strategic plan for this district and we need to work every single day to meet those goals. This is even more important in the next year as we execute the district integration plan. While intending to follow the Berkley formula, taking into account race, socioeconomic status, etc., our district needs to remain highly cognizant of the Special Education data. This will allow us to align the proper resources to the correct schools. Just because our focus has been on integration, doesn't mean we can overlook the law and what your children are legally entitled to.

SOMA is a creative, highly educated, diverse community and right now our district doesn't reflect that. I am willing to do the work that so many of us wish we had the time to commit to, and while not personally a member of your group, I would be honored to lobby for your cause.

Elissa Malespina

1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience regarding special education?

I have had experiences with special education on a personal and professional level. My son had an IEP due to speech and OT issues, when he first entered the district at age 3. He was in the pilot class of the ELLI Preschool program and I saw just how much his amazing teachers and therapists helped him grow. If you spoke to him when he entered that program, you would likely not have understood a word he said. Today he's progressed so far that he intends to major in sports journalism and broadcasting in college. That would not have been possible without the incredible hard work and dedication of his teachers and Speech and OT Specialists. With their help, he was unclassified after 1st Grade, and after an ADHD diagnosis in 4th Grade he's had a 504 plan. Since that time we have had to fight numerous times with the district to make sure he is getting the accommodation required by law. We joined the Black Parents Workshop lawsuit because we knew firsthand that special education students were not getting the services needed and wanted changes to be made.

On a professional level I have been an educator for 20 years and I have worked closely with the special education teachers to make sure that library lessons I taught were differentiated to meet the needs of the students. I was the first librarian in the district to set aside time just for the MD students to come into the library. My library was seen as a model of how to work with and help special education and at-risk students in the district. I also continued this at Somerville Middle School and now at Verona High School. Previous to working in SOMSD, I spent a year at Washington Academy, a private special education school, working with Autistic and ED students.

2. How will you help the Administration prioritize and improve special education services within the district schools?

Highly trained and qualified Paraprofessionals are key to the success of our special-education programs. A number of years ago SOMSD outsourced these jobs as a cost-cutting measure. I immediately saw first hand a huge drop in the quality of services provided. Many times other teachers and I caught Paraprofessionals not paying attention, texting, and actually sleeping on the job. This never happened with the dedicated on-staff workers the outsourcing had replaced. Even with numerous complaints to administration from parents and teachers, nothing has changed. This is not acceptable, and we must look for ways to bring back our Paraprofessionals. I believe that must be our number one priority.

We must reduce the amount of students that are in out of district placements. We need to look at ways to keep those students in district and bring as many students currently in out-of-district placement back if we have the services available to give them the education they need.

We also need to re-examine caseloads for our child study teams to see if there is a way to lighten some of the load for these dedicated professionals who are at times way overworked.

At the core, we must get back to the basics and follow the laws that govern how we handle IEPs and 504s. Our settlement costs skyrocket because we are not following what we need to do by law. It is very simple- do what you are required to do by law, and lawsuits decline, which in turn leads to us having more money.

3. Given that the district is all virtual due to COVID-19, how should the Administration work to accommodate the needs of Special education students and make sure IEP and 504 plans are implemented as completely as possible?

I agree with so many of the parents at the BOE meeting this month who spoke so passionately about how virtual learning is not working for their special education students. All students are struggling during remote learning, but our special education students are struggling the most and are at the greatest risk of regressing without in person instruction and support. Many other districts, including Verona where I work, have brought at least some of their special education students back into the classrooms and provided in-person services to those who need it. We must look at ways to safely make it possible for our special education students to receive in person instruction, especially those who are Multiply Disabled and are not in an inclusion setting for most of the day. I believe we can look at how other districts have managed to provide in person services to Special Educations students and look for ways to replicate it.

4. What considerations should be made for special education students as it pertains to the district's Intentional Integration Plan

The districts intentional integration plan must be designed in a way to ensure it meets the legal requirements as outlined in students IEPs. We need to make sure that students have the supports they need in place. We must also make sure that we do not end up with one school having more special education students than another like has happened in the past. We must work to make sure special education students are equally distributed between all of the schools. We also need to make sure that our students have access to the least restrictive environment possible as required by law. Before I would approve any plan as a BOE member I plan on seeing that we have taken the needs and considerations of our special education students into account.

Courtney Winkfield

1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience regarding special education?

My special education experience is rooted in my experiences as an educator and as a parent of a child who had an IEP through most of his elementary years. As a parent, I understand

firsthand the challenges of the referral and evaluation process and the incredible impact that dedicated special education teachers can have on the growth and development of students with different learning needs. As a teacher, I worked with my special education co-teacher to plan differentiated lessons for my middle and high school students, using the IEP and formative data to create strategic groupings and multiple pathways to demonstrate course mastery.

As a principal, I recruited and hired experienced special educators to support our students with IEPs (on average 25 percent of our overall enrollment) and with 504s, provided dedicated professional development and mentoring opportunities to support innovative and effective co-teaching in all inclusion classrooms, and ensured intentional programming so that students with IEPs had every opportunity to pursue course offerings, including programming inclusion for every AP and Honors course offering.

As a district leader, I lead efforts to examine disparities in special education referral data and rates of enrollment in AP/Honors for students with IEPs. We support districts and school teams in creating open AP/Honors enrollment practices, prioritizing special education programming for AP/Honors, and reviewing and disrupting bias-based practices embedded in referrals for special education.

2. How will you help the Administration prioritize and improve special education services within the district schools?

I will help set District policy to develop systems and structures to ensure that programming and supports are prioritized in the allocation of resources each year. As our schools develop their master schedule and programs each summer, they should begin by programming students with IEPs first, and appropriately, to ensure that students receive programs tailored to their individual needs. Programming must never serve as a barrier to students pursuing advanced courses, like AP and Honors, or a range of arts electives. As a Board member, I will work with the administration to ensure that student programs are designed to support, grow and empower our special education students and encourage investing in human capital so that our students with IEPs have every available opportunity to thrive. It is not only the strategic thing to do, but it helps us more fully live out our values of creating a more just and fair school system for all our students.

3. Given that the district is all virtual due to COVID-19, how should the Administration work to accommodate the needs of Special education students and make sure IEP and 504 plans are implemented as completely as possible?

It is clear to anyone paying attention that our students with IEPs are disproportionately struggling with remote learning. We have heard passionate pleas from our District families for adjustments to be made to better support their children. And while many have advocated for a prioritized return to in-person learning for our students with IEPs, we also know that a return to physical school won't solve all of the issues our students face. Still, the needs of our students

with IEPs should be our District's priority as we monitor the effectiveness of our remote instructional program, just as it should be during in-person learning.

Educators across the District should receive ongoing and targeted support adjusting best practices to implement IEP and 504 accommodations, including ways to provide small group learning reinforcement, one-on-one or small group extended support, options for flexible asynchronous learning and strategic use of paraprofessional support in the virtual space. At the same time, the District should plan to provide students with IEPs and 504s with opt-in in-person support as necessary, and where most appropriate, in particular with OT/PT and mandated individual and group counseling. Finally, the District should move swiftly to process the backlog of child study team evaluations to ensure that students who may need additional support, but have not yet received the IEP, do not slip through the cracks.

4. What considerations should be made for special education students as it pertains to the district's Intentional Integration Plan?

Each elementary school should have the capacity, tools and resources to support special education students. As we phase in our Intentional Integration Plan, beginning with our Kindergartners in the fall of 2021, it is vital that families can rely on a clear, transparent and consistent approach to special education supports and service, both within and outside of the classroom. Where gaps are identified, the District has an obligation to move quickly to provide necessary professional development, training and support to ensure coherence from the approach to inclusion co-teaching to the referral and evaluation process itself.

I will call for a moratorium on suspensions as we study the underlying causes contributing to a disproportionate number of our students with IEPs receiving punitive discipline measures, and encourage the District to implement a comprehensive restorative justice program, as research shows that consistent participation in restorative practices not only best supports our special education students, but also supports all our students in feeling a sense of belonging to a larger community and promotes values of collective responsibility.

Finally, I will support the District in implementing intentional consideration and support for our students with special needs when planning school events. When we center our special education students at the onset of the planning and create thoughtful supports like quiet rooms during large loud events, we ensure that all of our SOMA students are included and celebrated. As a community, we must work together on behalf of our special education students and create the conditions necessary for our students to receive the individualized support they need to thrive.

Kamal Zubieta

1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience regarding special education?

In February 2020, I was appointed to the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education in a 6-2 vote after the resignation of a board member. At the time, I did not have any experience with special education services in our district, but I did have a belief that all children love learning, especially when their education is interesting, challenging, and relevant. I appreciate that like their peers in general education, students in special education need an education appropriate for them.

Since my appointment, I have been learning about district policies and federal laws; like ADA, IDEA, and Section 504; that protect and serve students with disabilities. I have also carefully read and understood the challenges parents and guardians communicate to the Board. I have voted to approve resolutions regarding special education assignments and settlements.

Though still on a steep learning curve, it has been eye-opening for me to understand the challenges parents and guardians face to make sure their children receive a Free and Appropriate Education.

2. How will you help the Administration prioritize and improve special education services within the district schools?

I currently serve on the BOE policy and finance committees and would like to continue on both of these after the November election. The Policy Committee is in the process of updating Board policies to keep up with NJQSAC standards. I am proud to say that under the guidance of our new Assistant Superintendent of Special Services, we work very hard to ensure a quality education for special education students.

On the finance committee, I always have my eye on whether expenditures are distributed fairly. I make sure no child is left out from a policy decision or financial consideration. I appreciate that given the special services we have today, some students can be served well in-district. Others must be placed out of district until the services they need can be provided competently by the district. And due to the nature of their disabilities, some students must always be educated out-of-district. Special education is not just a line item in the budget; it is an essential service.

3. Given that the district is all virtual due to COVID-19, how should the Administration work to accommodate the needs of Special education students and make sure IEP and 504 plans are implemented as completely as possible?

In 2010, the district moved from directly employing providers of special services; such as OT, PT, speech, behavior supports, and emotional supports; to outsourcing the special services. The pandemic shed light on the vulnerability of this new arrangement. When the pandemic

began, many agencies to which we had outsourced were planning to lay off providers. It was unclear how students with disabilities would receive the services they needed and how the district would maintain a relationship with the providers whom students had already grown to love. All of these important providers interact with our students frequently, or even daily.

Ultimately, the district found a solution to continue special services, but now is the time to revert to directly employing providers of special services. In this way, the IEP and 504 plans of special education students can be implemented as completely as possible. The district would have greater oversight, and we could ensure regular training of providers and consistent delivery of services to special education students. Because providers would receive stable pay and benefits, they could develop long-term relationships with students and families. Of course, the ultimate beneficiaries would be special education students.

4. What considerations should be made for special education students as it pertains to the district's Intentional Integration Plan?

My commitment to access and equity is for all children. For this reason, I voted “yes” on the Intentional Integration Initiative in June. Just as race, ethnicity, gender identification, and socioeconomic class are decidedly important considerations in providing equal education, so too are types of learners, like students with IEPs, students with 504s, English language learners, over-age and under-credited students, and more.

An important aspect of access and equity is that general education students and special education students have equally rich educational opportunities that are appropriate for them and that spark joy. Every parent or guardian of a special education student must have a consistent experience with Special Services, one that includes a basic understanding of the process, key stakeholders, the steps necessary for classification and placement, appeals, and communication of a clear timeline.

For more information on my views about how to improve the South Orange Maplewood School District, please visit www.zubieta2020boe.com.