



2026 BOARD OF EDUCATION QUESTIONNAIRE CANDIDATE RESPONSES

October 4, 2026

To the South Orange-Maplewood Community,

We are pleased to share with you the **2026 Board of Education Candidate Responses** to our SEPAC SOMA BOE Candidate Questionnaire. We thank all the candidates for taking the time to share their perspectives. *The Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC SOMA) 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.

Each year, the Executive Board of SEPAC SOMA releases a BOE Candidate Questionnaire so the community can have a better understanding of the candidates' views and any experiences they may have related to special education. We know special education is something people often learn about on a need-to-know basis. However, we believe holding a seat on the BOE means one is serving every student, including those with disabilities. It is our intention to provide them with questions that can be considered thoughtfully and without having to be an 'expert' on the subject. The candidates were invited to provide written statements in the form of responses to four questions:

QUESTION 1. The BOE sets goals for the district each year. In regard to special education in SOMSD in the upcoming year, **what would be your priorities to improve outcomes for students with disabilities - including related services and transportation? What are some ways you believe that the school district can accomplish these goals?**

QUESTION 2. As a cost-saving measure, the district switched paraprofessional vendors this June. As a result, we lost over 80% of our experienced paras, and during the first few weeks of school, we are still seeing staffing shortages, causing scores of IEPs to be out of compliance. **How would you hold central administration accountable for the operational failures related to this vendor transition?** This transition is part of a district pattern of prioritizing short-term cost savings over the rights of disabled students. **What policies, structural, or procedural changes at both the board and district levels would you support to ensure that special education needs drive budgetary decisions, and not the other way around?**

QUESTION 3. Students with out-of-district placements are still SOMSD students, yet those families regularly report feeling ignored by the district. **How will you ensure that OOD families receive equal access to communication, support services, and district representation? How will you provide our schools the resources required to meet the needs of these students, allowing them to return in-district?**

QUESTION 4. Please share any experiences – personal, professional, or otherwise – that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming. **For those of you that have previously served on the board, what policies have you supported or implemented that benefit our special education population?**

The following responses are in alphabetical order by candidate last name. Responses are presented as received with only minor edits to keep formatting consistent. 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. Responses are also available on our [SEPAC SOMA website](#).

Please visit the website to learn more about special education in South Orange/Maplewood and to sign up to receive regular notices of SEPAC meetings and activities. We also invite you to our **Cup Chat on October 18th**, where the Board of Education Candidates will be present.

But most importantly, we encourage all eligible voters to get out and vote. [Early in-person voting](#) is available October 24 - November 1. **Election Day is Tuesday, November 3, 2026.** Polls will be open 6am-8pm.

SEPAC SOMA Board, 2026-2027

Verna Holcomb, *President*

Scott Ingles, *Vice President of Policy Initiatives*

Ifeoma Nwigwe, *Vice President of Family Engagement*

Lark Losardo, *Vice President of Community Outreach*

Juli Fairaizl, *Programming Director*

Amanda Durett Cercone, *Communications Director*

Nicole Josey, *Ex Officio*

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[WILL MEYER](#) (pages 15-18)

TRISH AZEEZ

QUESTION 1: My first priority would be simple: make sure students actually receive the services and supports their IEPs say they need, and measure whether those services are improving outcomes.

I would like the Board to establish measurable goals around IEP compliance, timely evaluations and services, academic growth, related services, transportation reliability, and parent satisfaction. I would also want regular reporting on how long students wait between identification of a need and delivery of an intervention or service. Data should be collected on an ongoing basis and discussed at monthly Special Services Committee meetings.

We also need to strengthen our capacity to serve students effectively in-district. SOMSD's 2024 special education audit found that more than 1,300 students received special education services and 141 students were educated out of district. Some students absolutely require specialized placements, and those placements should be protected when they are appropriate. But we should also understand why students are leaving, what services we lack, and where investing in district expertise could allow more students to thrive here.

Transportation is part of this responsibility. If transportation is included in a student's IEP, reliable transportation is a service, not a convenience. I would ask the administration to track late or missed transportation, excessive ride times, instructional time lost, complaints, and resolution times.

Finally, I would strengthen communication with families. Parents should not have to become experts in special education law, or repeatedly escalate concerns, to get services already promised to their children. The Board's role is not to manage individual IEPs, but it absolutely is our responsibility to make sure the systems supporting those IEPs work.

QUESTION 2: The paraprofessional transition raises a larger issue for me: cost savings cannot be considered successful if they prevent us from delivering legally required services to students.

I believe strongly in spending with purpose and finding efficiencies, particularly given the district's financial challenges. But special education decisions can't begin with a dollar amount and then ask how student needs can fit within it. We have to understand the services students require, our legal obligations, and the educational consequences before determining where efficiencies are possible.

For significant special education contracts, I would support stronger oversight before and after Board approval. That should include a transition and risk-management plan, clear performance standards, and a mandatory 30-day review period giving SEPAC an opportunity to provide formal feedback. Once implemented, administration should report whether the vendor is actually meeting its obligations, including staffing, qualifications, service delivery and IEP compliance.

In this case, I would want to know how many required paraprofessional positions went unfilled, how many students did not receive IEP-mandated support, how long those gaps lasted, what corrective action was taken, and whether the vendor met its contractual obligations.

The Board has one employee, the superintendent, and it must hold that employee accountable for district performance by setting clear, measurable goals and monitoring progress throughout the year. Waiting until June (when a Superintendent's review is due) to assess whether those goals are being met is not sufficient.

I also believe the district's current goals are not specific enough when it comes to outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly given the substantial achievement gaps these students face. Although the goals were approved by the Board in September, the Board should require measurable academic outcomes for special education—for example, specific targets for increasing ELA and math proficiency, along with interim benchmarks that allow us to determine throughout the year whether we are making meaningful progress. A goal to "improve outcomes" is not enough. We should define what improvement means, by how much, and by when.

When data show that something is not working, the Board should require administration to identify the cause, present a corrective-action plan with deadlines, and report publicly on progress. Failures involving legally-required services demand an especially urgent response, and repeated operational failures should be reflected in the superintendent's evaluation.

The Board should not manage the district day to day, but it must set expectations, obtain the information needed to evaluate performance, and act when those expectations are not met.

QUESTION 3: Students placed out of district remain our students, and their families should never feel that leaving a SOMSD building means leaving the SOMSD community.

I would support establishing a consistent communication structure for out-of-district families, including a clearly identified district contact, regular outreach from Special Services, information about district programs and resources, and opportunities for families to provide feedback directly to the district and Board. I would also want the district to survey these families about communication, transportation, case management, and the services their children receive at least annually.

At the same time, we should use out-of-district placements as important information about our own capacity. I would ask annually: Why are students being placed out of district? What services or expertise do those placements provide that we cannot? Are there clusters of needs for which developing a strong in-district program would provide students with an excellent education closer to home?

The goal should not be bringing students back simply to save money. Some students need highly specialized settings, and the appropriate placement should be determined by the student's needs. But where we see enough students requiring similar services, we should examine whether

investing in specialized teachers, clinicians, programs, facilities, or other supports could allow us to serve those students exceptionally well within SOMSD.

Success should be measured by more than the number of students returned. I would look at student progress, successful transitions, family satisfaction, service quality, and whether students are being educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate for them.

QUESTION 4: As a parent, I have spent years navigating our district when my son needed additional support. I have experienced how difficult it can be when your child is struggling but does not fit neatly into a category or when assessments that appear “average” do not fully capture the gap between a child’s abilities and areas of need. I have gone through the evaluation process, 504 process, meetings with educators and administrators, and the work of trying to understand what supports my child needed to succeed.

For years, my son was not set up for success because the district decided he wasn’t doing poorly enough to warrant support, despite an independent evaluation proving otherwise. That experience has taught me something important: parents should not have to fight the system or understand every procedural detail in order for their child’s needs to be recognized. And we need a system that doesn’t wait until a child is failing before support is offered or provided.

Professionally, I spent years as an economist and equity research analyst. That training taught me to examine data, question assumptions, understand tradeoffs, and distinguish between what an organization says it is doing and whether the evidence shows that it is working. I would bring that same discipline to the Board.

I would ask: Are students receiving the services in their IEPs? How long are families waiting for evaluations and services? Most importantly, are interventions improving academic and functional outcomes? Other questions include: Are staffing decisions creating compliance problems? Why are students being sent out of district? And where are the recurring complaints telling us that we have a systemic problem rather than an isolated one?

My experience has also made me very aware that children can have significant strengths alongside significant needs. Our job should never be simply to remediate a disability. It is to give every student the support and the challenge necessary to reach their full potential.

That principle is central to why I am running for the Board.

LIZ CALLAHAN

QUESTION 1: I think it is important to start with how district goals are developed, because there is a meaningful difference between inheriting goals and helping shape them.

A Board member sworn in during January is, in their first year, inheriting goals that have already been established. In my second, and now third, year on the Board, I have been at the table as Board goals were developed and have participated in the feedback cycles for the district goals developed by the Superintendent and his Senior Leadership Team.

Special Education has been part of those goals throughout my tenure. Last year, we had a district goal explicitly focused on Special Services. The purpose was to begin breaking down silos between Special Services and Curriculum & Instruction and build structures that allow those teams to work together more effectively. That included co-creating an ICRS instructional rubric, using it during instructional rounds, establishing a regular cadence of interdepartmental planning, and formalizing the EBR scope and sequence.

We also had a Board goal focused on establishing a regular cadence for reviewing district legal costs across relevant committees, and we implemented that work within the Special Services Committee. That gave us greater visibility into an area with significant implications for students, families, and district resources.

This year, during the district-goal feedback process, I advocated for us to go further in strengthening the systems and outcomes that support students with disabilities. For me, that means four priorities:

- Consistent implementation and timely services. We need to know that IEPs are being implemented as written -including related services- and that evaluations, reevaluations, meetings, and other required processes are occurring within statutory timelines. That includes the related services students are entitled to receive.
- Student outcomes and equity. We should be monitoring progress, while also examining disproportionate outcomes and risk ratios for identified student populations in areas such as special education identification, placement, and discipline.
- Family experience and resolution. We need to track concerns, escalations, response times, and resolution rates so that we can identify recurring systemic problems rather than requiring families to repeatedly navigate the same barriers on their own.
- Staffing, service capacity, and operations. We need to monitor vacancies, caseloads, staffing levels, related-service capacity, paraprofessional coverage, and Child Study Team capacity so that we know whether we actually have the people and systems necessary to deliver what students need.

I support the District Goals adopted by the Board in September. The Connected Learning Framework is particularly relevant to Special Education because it brings together Universal Design for Learning, MTSS, strong Tier 1 instruction, and individualized supports. When we proactively design instruction for student variability, we reduce barriers before they become

problems and allow accommodations and supports to be part of good instruction rather than something students or families have to continually fight to receive.

The Student Wellness goal is also important. Students do not experience academic, social, and emotional needs in isolation, so a strong network of counseling, prevention, and wraparound supports is an important part of educational access for students with disabilities.

But the top-line goals are only the beginning. The Board's resolution specifically provides for those goals to be augmented with subgoals, measurable outcomes, and mid-year targets developed by the district. As Superintendent Bing explained, that work then comes through the committee structure, where the Board can examine the metrics and the oversight mechanisms.

And I think the same principle applies to transportation.

For a student with a disability, transportation is not simply a logistical issue. An unreliable route can mean lost instructional time, disrupted routines and dysregulation, missed related services, and stress for a family. This year, our committee has already begun working with SEPAC around transportation to understand particular concerns, particularly for our out-of-district families and the challenges of interdistrict transportation. The district is preparing a simple, one-page explanation of the transportation process and the appropriate contacts for resolving transportation problems specific to out-of-district families, to be posted in both the Transportation and Special Services sections of the district website.

That may sound like a small operational improvement, but clear systems and clear points of contact matter enormously when a family is trying to solve an urgent problem. It is also an example of how I think the Board should approach this work: listen to families, identify where systems are breaking down, and then make sure the administration has measurable processes for improving them.

For me, the priority is to make sure that Special Education functions as a system—not a collection of promises that families have to continually chase down.

Ultimately, a goal is useful only if we can tell whether we are achieving it. I want us to apply that same expectation to Special Education: define what success looks like, measure it consistently, listen to families and staff, and use the data to identify where our systems are working and where they need to change.

QUESTION 2: As someone who began my career as a paraprofessional, I know these are not simply positions on a spreadsheet. For many students with disabilities, a paraprofessional is an essential member of their educational team, and continuity, experience, training, and relationships matter. That is why it was deeply concerning to see some students begin the year without the support they are entitled to have. While the majority had a paraprofessional in place on the first day, some did not have one until the third week. That should never have happened, it was wholly unacceptable.

As a Board member who voted to approve the contract, I believe accountability means being willing to look honestly at our own decisions and learn from the results. As has been discussed in my capacity as Chair of Special Services Committee, there is a post-mortem from the Special

Services Department that has been requested, we created a paraprofessional monitoring dashboard using feedback directly from caregivers in the community, and supported the formation of a quarterly working group of SEPAC members and caregivers to monitor the transition. We will also be reviewing monthly survey feedback from parents and teachers on paraprofessionals. These structures are intended to help us identify concerns systematically, identify patterns, and understand the district's responses.

The review needs to answer some basic but important questions: Were our assumptions about recruitment and retention accurate? Were appropriate contingency plans in place, and were they activated when needed? Did the vendor meet the expectations established in the contract?

The Board's role is not to manage the paraprofessional workforce or direct day-to-day operations. Our responsibility is to establish clear expectations, policies, goals, and reporting structures; ensure that the Superintendent and administration have the systems necessary to implement them; and hold district leadership accountable for results.

Going forward, I would support several stronger safeguards for major decisions affecting special education services.

First, significant staffing, program, or vendor changes should include a student-impact and implementation-risk analysis alongside the fiscal analysis. Savings should be one part of the analysis—not the sole measure of success.

Second, contracts affecting essential student services should have clear performance expectations, reporting requirements, transition benchmarks, contingency plans, and escalation procedures. The Board should receive timely information when those benchmarks are not being met so that problems can be addressed before they become widespread.

We also need families at the table. SEPAC and caregivers often see operational problems before they appear in a district report. To that end, we have discussed strengthening SEPAC's engagement on our committee structure to include policy and agenda feedback, and the addition of a quarterly working group on the paraprofessional transition. These are steps toward creating a more robust feedback loop between families, staff, administration, and the Board.

At the same time, I think it is important to acknowledge the larger fiscal reality. Public schools are facing significant increases in personnel, health care, transportation, and special education costs, while state and federal funding has not kept pace with those realities. I have participated in conversations with state leaders about these challenges, and will be continuing to advocate at the state and federal levels for a fairer school funding formula and stronger special education funding. This is imperative -we cannot solve a structural funding problem simply by shifting costs or services within a local budget.

Locally, however, we can—and must—be disciplined stewards of public resources. Every dollar matters, but so does the cost of an implementation failure. A lower-cost proposal is not necessarily the lower-cost solution if it results in missed services, instability, staff turnover, or lost instructional time.

To that end, I also believe our Board has an opportunity to strengthen its own governance practices. Our 2026–27 Board goals explicitly call for stronger oversight of student outcomes, stronger governance structures and accountability, and more disciplined long-term stewardship of District resources. Those goals are directly relevant here. We need the information and internal controls to understand the assumptions behind major decisions, identify risks before implementation, monitor whether outcomes match expectations, and act when they do not.

Our responsibility as a Board is to make sure student needs are clearly understood before fiscal decisions are made, risks are identified and managed, families have a meaningful voice, and when implementation falls short, we know it, we own it, and we act.

QUESTION 3: I absolutely believe this is an area that requires continued attention. Students placed out of district (OOD) are still SOMSD students, and their families should feel that they are part of our school community. I value the experiences and perspectives of our out-of-district families, and I think we have an opportunity to be more intentional about how we communicate with, listen to, and support them.

From a governance perspective, that means creating consistent structures, as such I support Superintendent Bing's establishment of an OOD family quarterly meeting, and think that this would support the work of identifying specific, tangible ways to improve the experience of our OOD families.

I would support regular, accessible communication specifically for OOD families; would welcome thought partnering with SEPAC and the district to create meaningful family engagement structures; and regular opportunities for the Board to hear themes and concerns from these families. To that last point, this year, one of the items discussed with our SEPAC partners was bringing both the OOD and Mental Health liaisons directly into our committee meetings. This would work in tandem with the aforementioned quarterly meetings with OOD families proposed by the Superintendent.

Over the past three years, I have supported the District in making investments that have a direct impact on our ability to strengthen our continuum of services so that we can increasingly support a broader range of students. That has included expanded ERI programming at both the elementary and middle school levels, increased enrollment in our ASD classrooms, and working toward developing and opening our 18–21 transition program. We have also invested in Ross Greene, Orton-Gillingham, and an EBR scope and sequence, while moving toward a focus on UDL this year. At the same time, we have been doing significant work around MTSS and strengthening our inclusion model through our strong co-teaching framework, including an inclusion rubric and instructional rounds.

Taken together, these investments reflect an important shift toward building stronger, more inclusive programming across our schools while also developing the capacity to serve students who may need more intensive, self-contained programming. The goal is not simply to bring students back to the district; it is to build programs that are genuinely appropriate, effective, and sustainable for the students who need them. We have already seen stronger programming allow some students who might otherwise have required an OOD placement to remain in the district.

As Chair of the Special Services Committee, I have also asked the District to provide us with data on both out-of-district placements and internal special education placements over the past three years. We need to look carefully at those patterns: What needs are students most frequently going out of district to address? Are there programs or services we should be developing here? What would it take to do that well? And, equally important, how do we know whether our existing programs are producing good outcomes for students?

That last piece is especially important. Expanding a program is not enough; we need to measure its quality and effectiveness. As we continue developing our self-contained and more intensive programming, I want us to establish meaningful measures of student progress, inclusion opportunities, staffing and service capacity, and family experience so that we can continually improve those programs.

We also have to recognize that an appropriate OOD placement is sometimes the right placement for a student. Bringing every student back into the District should never become the goal at the expense of the individual child. Our goal should be a strong continuum in which we can meet more students' needs successfully within SOMSD, while better supporting and including families when an outside placement is the most appropriate option.

For me, this comes back to two responsibilities: belonging and quality. Every SOMSD student and family should know they are part of this community, regardless of where their child receives services. And our responsibility as a Board is to make sure we are building, evaluating, and investing in programs that give our students the best possible opportunities to thrive. That is what our students deserve.

QUESTION 4: Special education has been a significant part of my life's work as an educator. I began my career as a paraprofessional, then taught in self-contained and inclusion classrooms before becoming a behavior analyst and later moving into district-level leadership. I am now in my 22nd year in education and work professionally as a behavioral consultant across the state. I hold a master's degree in Applied Behavior Analysis and am a BCBA, and I have continued graduate work in Social-Emotional Learning and School Climate and Organizational Behavior Management.

That experience shapes how I approach these questions, but I am careful about the distinction between my roles. As a Board member, I do not act in my professional capacity on behalf of individual families, or attempt to administer the Special Services Department. The Board's role is to establish policy and priorities, allocate resources, ask whether our systems are working, and hold the Superintendent accountable for results.

Throughout my first term, I have chaired the Special Services Committee and also served on the Curriculum & Instruction Committee. I advocated for, and was proud to help move, Special Services from an ad hoc committee to a standing committee. That was important because our students with disabilities deserve dedicated and consistent Board oversight. At the same time, serving on both committees has reinforced for me that special education cannot and should not exist in a silo. We have worked to better connect special education with the District's broader instructional work, thinking more intentionally about inclusion, instruction, intervention, and student support as interconnected parts of the same educational system.

That has helped make special education a consistent area of Board oversight, with regular participation from District leadership and SEPAC. The Board also commissioned an independent special education audit following significant systemic failures that were clear at the time. The 2024 audit examined programming, staffing, and systems across a population then reported at approximately 1,352 students receiving special education services. We have subsequently monitored the District's corrective-action work and implementation of the audit recommendations.

Since January 2024, we have made meaningful investments in both programming and professional capacity. We have added CST members, expanded BCBA support, and maintained our K–5 co-teaching inclusion model despite significant budget pressures. The District has expanded ERI programming at both the elementary and middle school levels, increased enrollment in ASD classrooms, and is working toward an 18–21 transition program. We have invested in Ross Greene Collaborative Problem Solving, expanded Orton-Gillingham training, and implemented an evidence-based reading scope and sequence, while beginning work toward Universal Design for Learning this school year. We have also continued significant work on MTSS and strengthened our inclusion model through a strong co-teaching framework, including an inclusion rubric and instructional rounds.

Taken together, these investments reflect a commitment to seeing students' needs, and building a continuum of support around them. That means strengthening inclusive practices and access to the general education curriculum and community, while also developing high-quality, appropriately intensive programming for students who benefit from more specialized or self-contained environments.

As Chair of Special Services, I have also pushed for more consistent data and oversight around placements, services, staffing, transportation, and student and family experience. We have reviewed three years of internal and out-of-district placement data to understand where students are being served outside the District, what needs those placements are addressing, and where there may be opportunities to develop or strengthen programming within SOMSD. Just as importantly, we need to measure the quality and effectiveness of the programs we already have—not simply whether a program exists—so that we can continually improve the experience and outcomes for students. We also monitor risk ratios, looking for disproportionality in identification, placement, and other special education outcomes across student groups. This year, we have moved that review to a quarterly cadence so that we can identify inequitable patterns earlier, ask better questions about what may be driving them, and respond more intentionally. Finally, developed and administered a family experience survey and continue working to broaden participation so that more families' voices inform that work.

I have also advocated for special education outcomes to be incorporated into our broader District goals, including measures around IEP and service implementation, student progress and academic growth, inclusive educational environments, family concerns and resolution, staffing and service capacity, and equity. The goal is to move beyond simply asking whether we are compliant and ask whether our systems are actually helping students learn, participate, belong, and thrive. Compliance is the floor, not the ceiling.

I bring decades of professional experience and expertise in special education to the board, I also bring lived experience as a parent, and now as a Board Member who has navigated that side of the house. These experiences taken together have reinforced for me just how much we learn when we listen to one another and resist the temptation to assume that one perspective tells the whole story. Being open to multiple perspectives, and inviting them in is critical to continuing to grow and do the necessary work of true partnership.

Ultimately, I believe strong special education governance requires both expertise and humility: setting clear expectations, investing in capacity, breaking down silos, listening to students, families, and educators, measuring what matters, building and rebuilding trust, and holding ourselves accountable for results. Special education has been a significant part of my life's work, and I bring that experience to the Board with a deep belief that every student deserves to be understood, supported, included, and given the opportunity to thrive.

KEVIN DIAZ

QUESTION 1: For the upcoming school year, my priority would be to make sure that students with disabilities receive the services, support and dignity they are entitled to, while also making sure that we strengthen the board level oversight of special education outcomes.

First, we need to ensure the district is meeting its legal and educational obligation to all students, especially our students with disabilities. We need to make sure that there's data, processes and resources necessary to know which services are working.

As I have stressed before, families should not have to excessively advocate to receive evaluation or services to support their child's needs. I would like to measure the timeliness of the evaluations. Once a service is received we should monitor and ensure that the services are not only being received, but being received consistently as well as whether we are seeing progress towards their goals of their IEP.

As far as transportation, it would be ideal to see measurable metrics including on-time performance, missed or delayed rides, complaints, and any incidents.

Most importantly, we should not be measuring success by whether we simply complied with the requirement alone. However, we should be monitoring whether or not students are receiving the support they need to learn, participate, grow and to be as successful as possible.

My goal would be to ensure clear metrics, regular reporting, family feedback, professional development, and stronger board oversight to ensure that we are not only in compliance but seeking outcomes that are delivering results.

QUESTION 2: The board should not run the special education department, it should ensure that it is being run effectively as well as holding the superintendent accountable.

Cost savings cannot come at the expense of a child's legally required services. It also cannot be treated as a success if the result is a failure to deliver the services required.

I want the board to ask better questions before a decision is made rather than trying to reconstruct what went wrong afterwards. The board should be asking the difficult questions when something is up for a vote asking will we be legally compliant, what is the student impact, are there any staffing concerns, what is the vendor performance history, are there risks and what the contingency plan, what are the long term affects, how is success measured, and lastly, what are the projected savings. My goal would be to make sure that student needs, service, quality, legal obligations are met before any savings is considered.

The board should set clear expectations, monitor performance and hold the superintendent accountable. On the current change I would ask for the district to evaluate the impact on the recent paraprofessional contract change.

The following data should be requested on the number of
Vacancies
Para professional Turnover
Absences
Which services were missed, delayed or altered
Whether the district has incurred additional costs as a result of this transition.
What impact that has on student services.

QUESTION 3: OOD is a placement, not an exit from the district. I would ensure that out of district families have a point of contact within the district making sure they receive the same level of communication, respect, responsiveness as families placed within the SOMSD school district.

When a student is placed out of the district, I'd want the district to ask more probing questions.
Why are students being placed out of the district?
What types of programs or services do they require?
Are there multiple students that require the same services?
Are there similar needs that exist among students currently served in the district.
What program could we potentially develop?
Are there any opportunities to bring the appropriate services in-house?
What's the cost of tuition and transportation out of the district versus hiring qualified district staff to bring a percentage of them back in house?

I would also keep in mind that the out of district tuition and transportation can represent a significant amount. However, I think we should be very careful about our financial goals. If the students are receiving the services they need. We should only be considering returning students back into the SOMSD school district only when the district can provide an appropriate education and the IEP team determines that it's appropriate for that student. The financial savings of an out of district placement should never be the reason to bring a child back to the district if we cannot meet their needs.

If the goal is to return students to the district, we need to have a deliberate plan to build out that capacity by ensuring specialized classroom and appropriate instructional environments, special education, teachers and paraprofessionals, related service providers, professional development and transition planning for any students who may be able to return to me, this is both educational responsibility and board oversight. Responsibility that every SOMSD student deserves to be seen supported and represented even when the right educational placement happens to be outside of our building and when it does, they should be still treated with respect and dignity and provided proper communication on a regular basis with valid resources for them to communicate with the district as well.

QUESTION 4: I bring 20 years of customer service and relationship management skills. Most of my career has been built based on listening and communicating clearly, solving problems, and building relationships with people even when they have a different perspective. I am not going to pretend to be a special education expert. What I can bring is a commitment to governance and oversight that is grounded in empathy, equity, and accountability. I would support regular reporting to the board to be proactive in identifying patterns before families have to individually bring their problems forward.

WILL MEYER

QUESTION 1: The Board of Education is tasked on a yearly basis with establishing its goals for the upcoming school year, a task that we undertook over the summer of 2026, responsive to our Board Self Evaluation process. The Board also reviews and approves the District's goals for the school year. The Board does not write the District goals, however we give the Superintendent feedback on our concerns for the future of the district during the Chief School Administrator annual review process, and that guidance and feedback goes into the following year's goals.

Our 2026–2027 Board goals put a strong emphasis on measurable oversight of student outcomes and on understanding the impact of major District decisions. They call for an annual oversight calendar that specifically includes special education outcomes and services; a consistent student-outcomes dashboard with disaggregated data; and quarterly reporting that identifies targets, trends, areas of concern, and next steps. They also call for an impact-analysis framework for significant District decisions – including decisions concerning special education services and resources – so that the Board receives information about anticipated student impact, financial implications, alternatives, implementation, and measures of success. Particularly in light of the difficulties with this year's paraprofessional transition and the specter of additional budget cuts in the next year, I believe this is an important focus for how the Board exercises its oversight responsibility.

Those goals build on work we began last year. Our 2025–2026 Board goals focused on creating a more structured budget process, strengthening ongoing financial oversight, and establishing a regular calendar for Board review of District goals and student-achievement data. It is crucial to explicitly acknowledge the relationship between those pieces. Fiscal oversight, operational oversight, and student outcomes cannot be treated as separate conversations. When we consider a budget or operational change affecting special education, we need to understand not only what it costs, but what effect it will have on services and students and how we will know whether it succeeds.

There has also been an evolution in the District goals. In 2025–2026, the district set goals for four discrete areas within Special Services through the lens of academic culture and climate. These were important but narrowly focused. The 2026–2027 goals take a broader approach. The new Connected Learning Framework goal incorporates special education priorities within Universal Design for Learning, MTSS, strong Tier 1 instruction, culturally responsive teaching, individualized growth, and removing barriers to opportunity into the District's overall instructional system. Rather than treating special education as a separate instructional lane, the framework recognizes students with disabilities as part of the work we do to improve teaching and learning throughout the District.

As a standalone statement without more, I would not support this as an annual goal, and I made that clear during our September meeting to discuss these goals. Goals must specifically identify an objective to achieve, the timeline for completion, and how achievement will be measured. As in prior years, however, the District's broad top-line goals are always supported with discrete and targeted objectives and action items that are built to these standards, and the same is true this year. As was discussed at that same meeting, detailed objectives and action items have been prepared and will be reviewed in board committees to put a fine point on the District's actions this year.

Within these, I want to see action items addressing basic special education deliverables such as rates of compliance with evaluation timelines and IEP implementation, numbers of students with IEP goals being successfully achieved over the course of a year, responsiveness to parent concerns, including the basic task of actually responding to parent communications, and ensuring adequate staffing, including sufficient training of those staff members and coverage for absences, to address our students' needs.

Ultimately, the District goals should describe the educational system we are trying to build, while the Board goals should ensure that we can determine whether we are actually building it. For students with disabilities, that accountability has to reach all the way to the student's experience, ensuring that the services in the IEP are actually being delivered; that the necessary staff is in place; that transportation is reliable; that families are getting timely answers; and, most importantly, that students are making meaningful progress. Those are the outcomes I want our goals, our budget, and our oversight to drive.

QUESTION 2: The paraprofessional transition was unacceptable in its staffing shortfalls at the start of the school year. While the majority of students had a para in place on the first day of the school year, some students did not have a para assigned until the third week of school, and that should not have happened. As an attorney who fights for the rights of students who are not adequately served in school districts, I was incensed to be in this position in our own district, when the District had received confirmations that all positions were covered just days earlier.

As a Board member who voted to approve this contract, I share responsibility for demanding answers about why the transition failed and for making sure we change the systems that allowed it to happen. Accountability cannot consist simply of expressing frustration after the fact. I have asked that the District conduct a post-mortem and determine how this sudden shortfall took place, and what we can do within this contract to be made whole for any excess costs we were forced to expend to cover all positions. If there are students who have lasting deficits or impacts relating to this start of year shortfall, I would expect the Child Study Teams to address that issue head-on.

More fundamentally, as we move into another difficult budget year, special education compliance and student needs will always be constraints within which we budget, not variables that can be reduced to balance the budget. The District has an absolute obligation to implement IEPs regardless of cost.

As our budgeting process proceeds into the new school year, I want the Board to continue to exert the pressure we saw in the September meeting to mandate full transparency in every cut being contemplated, the options being considered for how to secure savings, and ensure the full community is aware of the possible moves as early as possible. This will not make those cuts any easier but we must all go into next year's process with eyes wide open. Special education may not be immune to that process, but neither should students with disabilities unduly bear the burden of balancing the budget for the entire district. Proportional compromise paired with the use of impact analysis will be necessary to ensure fairness as we navigate the choices to come.

As part of our community engagement in the budgeting process, I will continue to seek engagement from our special education families, including through SEPAC SOMA. The candid feedback and suggestions from that community, especially this summer and through the start of the school year, was crucially important, and we need more of it.

Finally, the Board needs more routine special education performance reporting. We should not be learning about failures primarily through individual complaints. Staffing levels, unfilled IEP-mandated positions and services, evaluation timelines, transportation failures and significant vendor performance problems should be visible early enough for intervention.

QUESTION 3: A student does not stop being an SOMSD student when the appropriate placement happens to be outside the District. That principle should govern everything from case management and transportation to communication with families and opportunities to participate in the life of the District.

For families, that means having a clearly identified District contact, timely responses from case managers and administrators, reliable transportation communication, and meaningful participation in transition planning. We should also make sure that information and opportunities routinely distributed to families attending our buildings reach OOD families where appropriate. The District's responsibility does not end when a placement is approved. OOD students should also continue to have access to district resources outside of the school day and have as much access as possible to their district peer group.

At the same time, I want us to continue expanding the range of students we can appropriately serve here. The 2024 independent audit reported approximately 1,352 students receiving special education services and approximately 138 students in out-of-district placements at that time. Since then, we have invested in additional CST capacity, behavioral supports, ERI programming, expanded autism programming and transition planning. Those investments matter both educationally and financially.

But bringing students back cannot become a cost-cutting exercise either. The objective is not fewer out of district placements; it is fewer students who have to leave SOMSD because we lack an appropriate program for them. Those are very different goals. Some students need specialized placements that we cannot and should not attempt to replicate, and their placement should be respected. For others, building appropriate programs locally can allow them to learn alongside their community, reduce lengthy transportation, make family participation easier and potentially reduce long-term costs.

Doing that responsibly requires upfront investment: appropriate special education teachers, related-service providers, behavioral expertise, trained paraprofessionals, suitable facilities and evidence-based programming. I would like us to use our OOD data much more strategically, such as looking at disability classifications, programs required, age groups, costs and the reasons students leave the District, to identify where a critical mass of students and needs makes development of a high-quality in-district program appropriate.

And when a student returns, the District needs a real transition plan. “In district” is not itself a successful outcome. The measure is whether the student is receiving an appropriate program, making progress, belonging to the school community and receiving the services required by the IEP.

QUESTION 4: Special education is both a professional and personal focus for me. I am an attorney whose practice is devoted to representing children with disabilities and their families. Before entering private practice, I spent six years at Advocates for Children of New York, and I have spent two decades representing families in matters involving evaluations, IEPs, related services, placements, transportation, due process and other special education issues. I have represented over a thousand families in my career. I was also a student with a disability myself, from elementary through high school, and my experience of the special education system, especially where it fell short, has shaped my career and engagement with education broadly.

That experience shapes how I approach these questions, but I am careful about the distinction between my roles. A board member does not act as an attorney for individual families and should not attempt to administer the special education department. The Board’s job is to establish policy and priorities, allocate resources, ask whether systems are working, and hold the Superintendent accountable for results.

During my first term, I served on the Board’s Special Education Committee and chaired the Policy Committee. Special education became a standing area of Board oversight, with regular participation by District leadership and SEPAC. The Board had commissioned an independent special education audit in light of significant failures that were clear at the time. The 2024 audit examined programming, staffing and systems across a population then reported at approximately 1,352 students receiving special education services. We have subsequently monitored the District’s corrective-action work and ongoing implementation of audit recommendations.

I have supported investments including an additional Child Study Team to reduce caseload pressure, expanded behavioral and instructional capacity, additional ERI and autism programming, and development of programming for older students transitioning toward adulthood. I have also worked on stronger 504 procedures and timelines and on policy and procedural improvements and protections affecting students with disabilities. The Board’s special education work has included formal regulations addressing identification and referral, FAPE, transition from early intervention, and training needs for professional and paraprofessional staff.

My goal is not only that the district achieves compliance, but that this is a baseline from which we continue to grow. Technical compliance is not enough if a child is not learning. Our objective has to be an effective special education system in which students receive services consistently, families can navigate the system without having to fight for basic answers, staff have the training and support to meet students’ needs, and we measure success by student progress.

That is also why I am candid about where we have fallen short. Paraprofessional staffing and transportation this year are obvious examples, and procedural failures still happen too frequently. The work of the next Board is not to declare special education “fixed.” It is to build on the structural work already underway while demanding much greater consistency in execution. That remains my priority for a second term.