



SEPAC SOMA

Special Education Parent Advisory Committee  
SOUTH ORANGE MAPLEWOOD

# **2017 Board of Education Election Candidate Statements on Special Education**

October 10, 2017

To the South Orange/Maplewood Community,

We are pleased to share with you these 2017 Board of Education candidate statements on special education. We thank all the candidates who responded for taking the time to share their perspectives.

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, and they do not reflect any input from SEPAC or its Executive Board.

All eight candidates were invited to provide statements in the form of responses to two questions:

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

Question 2. If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy and law?

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 <https://sepacsoma.org>.

Most importantly, we urge all eligible voters to get out and vote on Tuesday, November 7th between 6am and 8pm. To locate your polling place, visit: <https://voter.njsvrs.com/PublicAccess/jsp/PollPlace/PollPlaceSearch.jsp>

Sincerely,  
The SEPAC Executive Board

## **ELIZABETH BAKER**

***1. What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience and priorities regarding special education? 2. If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy and law? (Note: Ms. Baker submitted her answers to these questions in a single response, as follows.)***

My work on the Board is informed by my training as a lawyer, my professional experience advocating on behalf of employees with disabilities, and my experience as a parent in the district who has seen and experienced gaps in services and, at times, what seems to be an indifference to the needs and the potential of individual students. As a Board member, I have been an advocate for students with disabilities by driving the policy, budgetary, and oversight work that is needed to effect both the changes in program and mindset that our students deserve. I am committed to ensuring that we have a strong feedback loop from parents, students and staff, a collaborative and candid working relationship with SEPAC, as well as the Special Ed PTO and Twice Exceptional parent organizations, and that we are also looking outward to assess our special education programs against best practices.

Policy: I am proud of the work that I led in partnership with SEPAC to draft the Section 504 policy, but our Board must now use its monitoring authority to ensure that our District does the significant work that remains on implementation of the policy (including filling the gaps in the regulations that were issued by Dr. Ramos) and that we fully implement the Intervention and Referral Service (“IR&S”) policy that SEPAC helped author in 2014. We also need to look closely at our Special Education policy to ensure that it aligns both on paper and in practice with current law, best practices, and the Section 504 and IR&S policies as they are interrelated. Now that we have a permanent Director of Special Services and Youth Development, this work must include data-based public reports to the Board and community as outlined in each of those policies.

Program: The Board must ensure that our superintendent, leadership in Special Services, and our building leaders are continually working to identify the gaps in our services and processes that have resulted in delayed identifications and a failure to plan for and proactively meet students’ needs. The opening of Montrose and recent hiring of a Board Certified Behavior Analyst (“B.C.B.A”) are examples of what can and must continue to be done. We must also step up our efforts to ensure that students are being adequately supported in the least restrictive environment – which I believe requires analysis of the quality of our paraprofessional services, sufficient resource room supports at each school, and a close examination of our co-teaching model – especially in the secondary schools where there does not yet appear to consistent practice. We must assign clear points of responsibility and ownership for ensuring compliance with students’ IEP’s – especially where we are relying on outside vendors or contracted professionals. We must also ensure that the school expansion and renovation work that we are about to undertake creates adequate space and a conducive environment for the support services that will allow more children to remain in district.

Personnel: Essential to all this work are personnel who are aligned with and committed not only to meeting the needs of students with disabilities, but who are aspirational for their students and see their incredible potential. The Board has only one direct employee – the superintendent. The Board must not only work with the current Interim Superintendent to set District goals that move our special education programs forward and monitor that progress, but the Board, through the personnel committee which was formed this year, must ensure that we are strengthening our practices for the hiring, evaluation, development, and retention of highly qualified personnel -- from the leadership in our school buildings and Special Services department, to our certificated staff within both the Special Services Department and our general education staff. This work has already been identified with Dr. Ficarra as a high priority, and it must remain at the forefront when we undertake the search process for the permanent superintendent.

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## **ROBIN BAKER**

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

The vast majority of my experience with Special Education was during my years on the Board of Education from 1998 to 2001. It has been quite some time and I am getting up to speed again. My recent efforts have been focused on understanding: a) the laws governing the provision of services; b) the two plan-development categories (IEP and 504); and most importantly c) our current policies and what the conditions are in our district today. I feel this basic foundation of knowledge is important for anyone charged with influencing the district's priorities regarding special education. I have not completed this process, but from what I have gathered so far, my top two (2) priorities would be: a) improving the communication infrastructure so that parents in need of support for their children can navigate the path from evaluation to plan development and implementation quickly and confidently, receiving timely, informative feedback and guidance along the way; and b) ensuring that existing plans are being executed well for all students and supported with resources to ensure maximum inclusiveness and excellent results for the entire class. I know there are many other areas where opportunities for improvement exist, but these are the ones that have come up most frequently in my conversations on the subject. I am certainly open to re-evaluating my priorities as I continue to learn more and talk to a wider group of people.

### ***2. If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy?***

As an individual whose career has been mainly in Finance and Strategic Planning with a healthy dose of Process Improvement, I am keenly aware of the place compliance and accountability have in the successful delivery of services. Where compliance is concerned, clearly defined requirements and regular, transparent reporting against those requirements are the best tools

for informing oversight and spurring/enabling course-correction where required. With respect to accountability, at the most basic level I believe it is incumbent upon the Board to provide clear direction to the Superintendent via policy and to engage on the topic of special education to ensure the Board and Superintendent are completely aligned on the interpretation of that policy, what excellent implementation should look like, and how to gauge progress. Additionally, well-defined roles and responsibilities must be in place. If elected, I would work to have a deeper understanding of some operational aspects of our special education policies to inform my opinions about how best to support the objectives of the district and the goals of the Superintendent and Executive Director with respect to my votes on budgeting and prioritization of efforts and focus.

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## **SHANNON CUTTLE**

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

As a teacher and a school administrator I, of course, have both known and accommodated special needs students and come to know and work with their parents. As an advocate for all children and families I bring the perspective that every child should be in a safe and supportive environment and I want to work to see that move from a wish to a reality for all our students. Especially in SOMSD there seems to be a systematic and leadership issue in actively ensuring that these students thrive in our school district rather than just fitting them in to the existing frameworks. Too often the parents of these students find the school district to be adversarial in meeting their children's needs and that is the exact opposite of the value system our schools and communities promote.

As an educator, my experience has been in inclusive classrooms with students of various abilities and needs. My background includes working with and specializing in students with emotional impairment, autism and oppositional defiant disorder. I firmly believe that we need to be active in addressing and providing resources that benefit the whole-child across the cognitive, physical, emotional, behavioral, social, and educational experiences.

### ***2. If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy and law?***

Breaking down and examining the way SOMSD delivers education is key to both our special education populations as well as the general access and equity policy targets. All our children are on a spectrum of accomplishment, need and acquired skills and the district needs to keep examining how we deliver the support services and the learning opportunities to every child. And that includes wrap around needs, transportation and safety.

Collecting and analyzing better and finer data on students as well as checking in with families in a meaningful way that gets shared with leadership and the board needs to be a goal and I will be encouraging the board as a whole to task the Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development to develop the data collection system and report to the board on a regular basis what the district is doing to repair the record it has on delivering education to our special population. Working with parents and other stakeholders to ensure not only best practices but also ensuring needs are being met across the school community.

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**FELISHA GEORGE**

Ms. George did not respond to SEPAC's requests for comment.

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**AVERY JULIEN**

Mr. Julien did not respond to SEPAC's requests for comment.

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**ANTHONY MAZZOCCHI**

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

I have been a teacher and an educational leader in the public and private system for almost 20 years. I have taught music and coordinated areas in the heart of Brooklyn, written curriculum for the NYCDOE, served as Director of Fine and Performing Arts right here in SOMSD, and I now run a School of Music at Montclair State University that trains teachers, as well as a summer school in Vermont that educates and trains students from all walks of life.

In all my work, I have found that it is extremely important to re-calibrate many of our discussions regarding education to remind ourselves that we are in a *human* enterprise. It's a personal process, with real human beings at the core of it. After all the testing is completed and the data is collated, these are our youngest citizens who will reimagine our world. They must be seen as having strengths and passion when they arrive in school, not deficits that must be fixed. We must then reimagine and reorganize our schools around those strengths.

The problem is, our schools' value system – especially over the past 15 years – has been at odds with this idea. We have been standardizing education more and more every year, but we must get back to personalizing it. Many children have been marginalized in the spirit of “school reform”, including our children with special needs. I am proud of the work I have done and will continue to do to help schools broaden their curriculum to include the arts, sciences, creative subjects, and VoTech offerings --and take a more practical approach to teaching and learning well into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**2. *If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy and law?***

The fact that this is SEPAC's essential question to the candidates is evidence of the fact that this has been a problem area for the district that needs to be addressed – preferably, once and for all.

If elected, it's crucial that we, as a Board, work proactively with the Interim Superintendent and the Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development to address some of the reoccurring issues. I believe SEPAC plays an important role in this process, and I plan on certainly looking to them for guidance.

I believe it is of paramount importance that we look to other resources for guidance on how to apply lessons and strategies effectively used in other districts to SOMSD. We must implement and communicate policy far better, and we absolutely must abide by the law and state code.

SOMSD is an outlier as far as out-of-district costs as compared to other districts. As I stated above in my intro: students are not numbers, and they are certainly not dollar signs. But we must investigate reasons why we, as a district, seem unable to meet the needs of so many. It is inappropriate to simply state that the solution is to "bring students back" to district, but I believe it should be our mission to identify strategies and best practices in other districts in order to help keep students in-district and off home instruction (saving hundreds of thousands of dollars) as a result of a particular program when at all possible. We must then build those programs from the ground up here in district. I would like to see us expand our Special Education services and offerings to keep more students in district, as well as attract other Special Education students from others. On occasion, we should challenge the fee structures and costs of some of the providers and transportation. This is done to be sure we meet the important needs of the students while also trying to be careful in managing taxpayer dollars.

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**SHEILA SHIDNIA**

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

Giving attention to the needs of students with special needs is an important and integral part of any healthy education system. It is a priority of mine to ensure all students receive the highest quality education regardless of differing abilities, needs, cultures, means, or family structures.

My personal and academic experience have reinforced my belief, that high-quality education is a right for all students. For the past three years, I have been completing coursework towards a Masters Degree in Music Therapy, where I have focused on children with special needs. To that end, I have completed two related fieldwork experiences at The Rebecca School in NYC (a therapeutic day school for children with neurodevelopmental delays of relating and

communicating), and the Ben Samuels Children's Center in Montclair, NJ. What I learned in both placements is that state mandates can fall short of meeting the needs of students, making it vital to work as an advocate for all children in our public school system.

***2. If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy and law?***

In any school district, advocacy is needed. Unfortunately, it is often left up to the parents of students with special needs to be the most active in making sure the district fulfills state mandates (in the very least), and affords the best education in the least restricted environment for their children. I am happy to see such an active and vocal parent group in the SOMA SEPAC. Reading SEPAC's August 10, 2017 letter to the BOE, I am interested to find out why so many 504 mandates have been left open, providing a disservice to a portion of our student body. I hope the BOE will be transparent in their response so all of us in the community can assist this parent group in ensuring their children are provided for.

There are parents and educators in our community that know what we need from the Executive Director of Special Services, and as a BOE member, I would see it as my role to make sure that those voices are heard. I would be there to ensure that the district is compliant, but even more importantly, ensure that we are doing everything we can to meet and academic needs of all students in our community.

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**DONNA SMITH**

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

For years, I have consistently supported achievement for ALL students and across multiple gaps. Special Ed is the worst gap we have in the district and I have advocated for more focus and attention to that gap through:

Proper hiring of qualified personnel. In the past year, the Board approved of the Superintendent's hiring of Dr. Lieberman as an interim Director of Special Services and welcomed Dr. Lieberman's recommendations with regard to the special education program at SOMSD. He identified the need for a number of new teaching positions in order to bring the district up to compliance with class enrollment size and program requirements. Under his guidance, the district also implemented an Evidence Based Reading Program for special education students, to help address deficits in reading, and added more upper grade level self-contained classes in order to provide students with the least restrictive environment, allowing students to remain in their local community. Finally, the Board approved the recommendation to hire Dr. Reisenauer, the new Executive Director of Special Services & Youth Development, to continue working on the improvement of the Special Ed program.



Proper implementation of policies and procedures. While on the Policy & Monitoring Committee, I advocated for proper implementation of policies and supports including for the Montrose pre-school. The Board also has adopted a new 504 policy, which provided comprehensive guidance to the administration for the development of 504 regulations. As SEPAC has pointed out, the regulations require further enhancement, which will be the work for Dr. Reisenauer.

I certainly do not know everything about Special Education but am a strong believer in the Board understanding the needs of the community of parents, students and others. Since my first campaign, through my first board term and into this second campaign, I have walked countless streets, attended public events, and manned tables for the Board, in order to interact with members of our community and hear their concerns.

***2. If you are elected, how do you see yourself working with the new Executive Director of Special Services and Youth Development and the Interim Superintendent to ensure compliance with and accountability for implementing special education policy and law?***

If re-elected, I will continue to advocate for:

Early intervention in-district. The Montrose pre-school is a great program, which is one way of providing support at an early stage. Early, appropriate interventions need to continue in the elementary grades. If we can truly provide our Special Ed students with what they need, then the district can start working together with parents in partnership, rather than on opposing sides of legal cases.

Legal and policy compliance. The Board also must be more diligent in ensuring that the new 504 rules, as well as existing rules for special education and IEPs are being followed. Likewise, for students who need gifted & talented interventions or who are twice exceptional, the Board needs to ensure that the district implements consistent identification measures. The Board should encourage Administration to move beyond just 'strategies' into true curricular and programmatic extensions that provide the right interventions necessary for these students, including twice-exceptional students. The Board must continue to review existing policies to ensure that they are up to date and in compliance with the law.

Improved data. More data-driven monitoring reports, delivered on a regular basis to the Board--perhaps quarterly--will also help the Board ensure all students of special needs are receiving the supports that they need.

Policy governance. The Board has one employee – the Superintendent, who is responsible for the personnel in the district. I look forward to working with the Interim Superintendent to build on the work we have already done, to improve the special education program in our district. Dr. Reisenauer, who reports directly to the Superintendent, has her work cut out for her and the Board needs to provide guidance and support to the Interim Superintendent, to help inform her in her work.