

**2018 Board of Education**

**Candidate Statements on Special Education**

**October, 2018**

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**To the South Orange-Maplewood Community,**

**We are pleased to share with you these 2018 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 two questions. The attached responses are presented in alphabetical order by candidate name.**

1. **What would you like SEPAC members to know about your experience and priorities regarding special education?**
2. **Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

**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/**](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 on *Tuesday, November 6th*.**

**Sincerely,**

**The SEPAC Executive Board**

**Marian Cutler**

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

A communicator by profession, my experience ensuring a strong narrative -- one supporting by evidence, data and personal input -- is one of my key abilities I'd bring to the BOE as it relates to all students. More specifically, for special education, this means setting a proactive, communicative course, in concert with SOMA SEPAC, so all of our residents know the amazing work we are doing for and on behalf of our children while working to contain the misinformation being shared by those unaware of how our resources for special education are being used to provide valuable and needed services.

The reality of our District, with the cacophony of needs, issues and brick & mortar challenges, can overpower some voices discussing both need and accomplishments which could translate into parents developing low expectations of having the District meet the unique needs of our children where they are to ensure our students are well-served. We need to set a course or vision for how students with special needs are embraced by our District, what is expected for these students year-over-year as they transition to new classes, and create opportunities to celebrate their accomplishments.

Additionally, we need to remove the barriers to access these services in an effort to put to rest the urban legend that legal threats are the best course of action to get the attention of school administrators. Study after study, and personal story after personal story, show that early intervention is crucial to a student's overall success; and, as such, I would advocate for more focus put on identifying students who need intervention early on in their education.

Taken together -- a strong, positive narrative; showcases of success; removing barriers; and earlier identification -- will create an an atmosphere in which special education students are embraced and celebrated within our District.

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

Fundamentally, I welcome any rational and personal approach to keep more SOMA students within SOMA; but, only if it benefits the student first. It's important our approach to reducing reliance on out-of-district placements never be framed as an expense issue, but that it's positioned around how it benefits our students, their parents and the community-at-large. As a District, we have to continue prioritizing hiring staff, adding training, strengthening social and emotional programs, but all must be backed by data. As we work to positively impact the trajectory of our students and our District, we need to be hyper-vigilant to track our successes, correct for shortcomings and be transparent along the way.

While one element of our approach to special education is about early identification and early intervention, it must be coupled with an active role recruiting parents and students to return to SOMSD as we shore up our services and programs designed to provide needed supports and assists. Our District has a number of programs available that we need to make sure our parents know about, can readily access, and can talk with other families who've had success.

An additional priority is to create stability within our special education department. We need to create a climate and culture for these staff members to ensure they grow with our District and remain vested in the students they work with on a daily basis. We also need to enhance the programs and services we currently offer to ensure we are meeting the educational needs of our students from inclusion classrooms to afterschool programming.

**Shannon Cuttle**

**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. Priorities include: communications and repairing of trust, creating and improving spaces in the facilities that already exist to be accommodating inclusive and ADA compliant, one-on-one testing spaces, spaces for child study teams, innovative classroom furniture, committed spaces for occupational and physical therapy, consistency in services and supports system-wide instead of classroom by classroom or school by school, climate and culture that supports underserved student populations that include those with special needs, addressing over disciplining and labeling of kids with special needs.

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

All the stakeholders and the community need to be involved and connect best practices, policy, research and implementation to move our district forward. We need to bring the effective solutions into the classrooms and hallways of our schools to make systemic change while raising the critical questions. 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. We also must build support systems and training for staff at all levels and work to align child study team members, paras and nurses and other support staff in best practices and district protocols; working with stakeholders and larger SOMSD community to ensure that parents and families are getting information on services and ways to engage; 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 Director of Special Services to expand data collection systems 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 the most crucial needs are being met for vulnerable populations across the whole school community.

**Javier Farfan**

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

I don't have extensive experience on Special Education issues but have been learning about the topic since I decided to run for the Board. I think I understand the shortcomings of our district in its service to students with disabilities over the years and what needs to happen to address those shortcomings.

While there a lot of processes specific to Special Education (referral, evaluation, creation of an IEP) that don't work well in our district and need to be fixed, the bigger issue is that we need to change the culture of the district so that all teachers, administrators and others see all their interactions with parents not as "a problem to be handled" but as an opportunity to give service and help children. There is some work happening to make that happen, in terms of the work that Annemarie and the Board did the summer before last on a district committee charged with improving staff evaluations, and work to provide teachers with more approaches to how they engage with individual students. But for me, thinking of a big change to the organization, we need to do a major overhaul of recruitment and hiring. We need to do more than just post open positions when they become available, and then choose any applicant for the job. We need to decide months earlier, before we even know we have openings, who are the best and brightest, who may not even be looking for a job. And we need to be ready to interview them at length and be very choosy.

My own background gives me some insight into what needs to happen. I was the beneficiary of caring adults during my K-12 journey and I would have ended up nowhere without them. I have a picture in my mind of what each adult needs to do with the students in their care and that is just as true for students with disabilities as any other students.

While at SUNY Binghamton I co-founded a non-profit, JUMP Nation, dedicated to mentoring inner city middle schools by pairing them with Binghamton students. That didn't have anything to do with Special Education per se, but it had a lot to do with engagement and motivation and those needs are as real for students with disabilities as for others.

And in 2004-05, I worked with an old classmate to win a Mayor's Challenge Grant in New York City and we founded a public high school for young women focused on business, that drew disadvantaged high school girls from all over the city. That is still going strong.

I have four years of experience as an adjunct professor at Seton Hall in the Stillman School of Business.

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

I have learned enough about out-of-district placements to know that we should be prudent in how much we think we are going to accomplish, and we shouldn't think of bring students back in district as a way to save money. It will likely cost us as much, or more, to serve students with serious needs in district as the tuition we now pay for them. At best, we will save on transportation. And I know, but am not sure all others do, that many of the disabilities that lead to out-of-district placements are so severe, so complex, so unique, that we may ever be able to serve those students well in district and it may cost us more to do so than the current tuition. We need to deal with each student's circumstances individually, and to build a lot more trust in our department's capacity and reliability, before we go about the process of trying to convince parents to agree to bringing their children back in-district. What we need to do, as a first step is to get more assurance that our district's Child Study Teams are effectively monitoring the service children do receive in the out-of-district settings. We shouldn't rely on parents to know before we find out.

**Narda Greene & Michael Laskowski**

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

The platform of Narda Chisholm-Greene and Michael Laskowski is built on the idea of “Advocates for All.” As parents of five and four children respectively, three of Narda’s children have been educated in the district and two are currently at the high school. Michael has four children currently in the district. Narda and Michael, along with many SEPAC members have wended their way through the process of applying for (an IEP/504); Narda for several of her children and Michael for one of his children. The distinct lack of a strategic, unified process for registering IEP’s and 504’s has left many families frustrated and their children without the support they need. In many case it was only through the support of some highly experienced teachers that helped guide them. The fact is, unless a parent can navigate through a process that isn’t codified, the timelines uncertain, and the communication lacking, the child/student may not get the help they deserve. This must end.

We are excited to have Dr. Murano, Interim Director of Special Education, who seems to be finally addressing issues that have been unresolved for years, giving the Special Education Department the level of professionalism and commitment it needs. Priorities would include but are not limited to the following:

* Create one system for the registering of IEP’s and 504’s.
* Develop a clear process for review, assessment and communication between the parents and the Special Education department.
* Institutionalize the role that paraprofessionals play within the classroom and the value of having them present at IEP meetings and Back to School evenings.
* Hire a Superintendent that understands the needs of all students within our district, but who also has extensive experience with special educational programs, and the support and vision to carry that into the future.

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

After speaking with parents of children that have been placed out of district, many children would rather be at their local school, with friends from their neighborhood. In order to bring more students back into district we need to ensure that our facilities are able to provide the services needed to support those students.

It is through a defined vision of clarity that would allow us to focus on expanding “in house” services. We would need to find additional funding to fully prepare our schools, hire and train staff, and find and retain the experienced teachers in order to best serve our most at risk students. After doing some research, we were able to find a similar district in size, and scale, that has done a better job of finding State aid to buttress their respective programs. We need to do the same, and may want to find a lobbyist that would engage the State for that additional aid, including public and private grants.

These ideas are in concert with our vision of making Maplewood/South Orange the premier educational district in New Jersey.

**Annemarie Maini**

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

For the last eleven years, I have run the South Orange Country Day School, a Montessori preschool in South Orange, and transformed it from a teacher-directed, one-size-fits-all approach to the child-centered approach we use today. I believe that children benefit from engaging with and learning with their peers and that is why I think the mandated Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) is an essential guiding principle. To implement this well, we need to create a learning environment where the adults ask what can I do with the lesson, the space, or the pacing to support all the learners in the classroom. This learning environment would see every child as an individual, emphasize the importance of positive relationships and engagement between teachers and all their children, and ensure that from the first day of school, we are seeking to understand each child’s unique strengths and challenges.

I believe that to address children’s needs, the adults need to have the tools to try a variety of techniques and then to track the success of these tools across students. Being child centered does not mean that everything is willy nilly; instead it is a thoughtful approach to making sure that each child gets what they need. Our students and teachers need to be adequately supported in this least restrictive environment and we need to assess the adequacy of our para-professional services, determine sufficiency of our resource room allocation across our schools, and evaluate the efficacy of our co-teaching model across elementary and secondary schools.

The district’s planned data warehouse will be the first time where teachers will be able to track student performance across multiple interventions and determine what works best for a particular student. With this type of data tool and focus on student success, the district’s lack of an evidenced-based reading intervention toolset might have been identified well before this past spring. The district has also streamlined some of the their processes (like EZ IEP, using Powerschool to share accommodations, etc.) These tools will help the district meet its regulatory obligation as well as create a better working partnership with families by ensuring that there are clear points of responsibility across the entire system at every touchpoint with a child and family.

As we set the district goals for the past year, I advocated for a focus on ensuring that our district was complying with all Special Education Code. As chair of the Equity and Excellence Committee it has been a challenge to obtain data on how the district is serving our Special Needs Community in order to identify the root causes of our process that is preventing our ability to address all children’s needs. Distilling the relationship between I&RS and Special Services was critical to understanding the building leader’s role in taking responsibility for the learning of every child. The administration has made progress this year and I am optimistic that they will continue to improve our processes and program opportunities for the benefit of our families and teachers. I also look forward to improving our monitoring of infrastructure (and the new QSAC reporting requirements) so that we can spot problems and identify areas of improvement before it significantly impacts families.

Finally I believe that the successful launch of the Montrose Early Learning Center and the Preschool Grant announced in September will allow the district to identify needs earlier and better serve our students of all abilities as they advance through our schools

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

As I mentioned above, providing services in our district supports the Least Restrictive Environment mandate and I believe, with my whole being, this must be achieved for as many children as possible. However, there are some children who have severe and/or unique disabilities or combinations of disabilities that the district would be hard-pressed to serve effectively. These children require highly specialized programs which are often only offered at certain schools in a geographic area and we would be doing a disservice to these children if we attempted to provide those services in-house. The district might be able to save on transportation for some of these cases, but the risk of not being able to attract certified, experienced experts to work with these children is too high - it would directly impact their learning experience. As a community we can not allow uninformed chatter about bringing back all out-of-district placements or about how we will save boatloads of money on those we do bring back. These families are already facing the hardship of not having their children served in their own community.

Additionally, if the district has not demonstrated the ability to meet a child’s needs and provide the child an opportunity to achieve academically and socially, then the family must advocate for the best placement for their child. However, often families have been let down by the district with inconsistent services and non-specific IEPs, and the poor implementation and monitoring of IEPs. This leads many families to find alternative, out-of-district placements and often through litigation. If the district is to have success in returning children to the district, and prevent children from leaving in the first place, then the district must demonstrate its ability to meet these students’ needs and this will, overtime, rebuild confidence and trust among our families.

For the past year the administration has dedicated significant resources to addressing the needs of our special needs students. At the elementary level the district has added an evidence based reading interventionist to help ensure that across all our schools students have access to the reading intervention program that best meets their own individual needs. The administration also reviewed the IEPs of our high school students and found that the district needed to add over 20 special education teachers to ensure that students were getting the support that they needed. The district also hired a full time Board Certified Behavior Specialist to serve our students who need behavioral support and this specialist can also support classroom teachers with strategies, interventions, and supports to serve children in their classroom. These programmatic changes will continue to support all students and in particular to create a learning environment where each child is provided the supports to be successful, which in turn will support children and families to stay in district.

The administration is currently investigating additional programs that will support children in the classroom first, and to develop a trust with families that all adults in the district are working to support all children to be successful learners and participants in their schools. Going forward I will continue to support the administration’s effort to improve and enhance our programming by analyzing the data we are now able to collect on student progress, by listening to teachers, students, and families about what is working and what is missing, and by ensuring that we hire, mentor, and retain educational leaders fluent in best practices.

**Bruno Navarro**

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

In speaking with parents from around the district, in various grades and at different schoolsthroughout the South Orange-Maplewood School District, I have three main priorities when it comes to special education, as well as a comprehensive look educational policies: Transparency. Accountability. Dignity.

First and foremost, the district can do better with regard to informing parents about their options, the assessment process and the policies surrounding special education. There appears to be a disparity in how the district communicates with students and parents about the purpose of the district’s special education programs and resources: In our information age, this should not be the case. Secondly, accountability needs to be improved when it comes to educators setting, communicating and meeting individual students’ goals. Without a comprehensive plan for accountability, the risks of students falling through the cracks remains all too great. Parents should not have to file lawsuits in order to get their children the help they need and deserve. Finally, and just as importantly, the dignity of our students need to be recognized and incorporated on a day-to-day basis when it comes to all educational programs. Children are more than data points on a spreadsheet, and I would like to see better whole-child assessments in special education classes and better integration in standard classrooms where appropriate. Of course, it’s more time-consuming, but all students deserve to have their talents and challenges evaluated in the most comprehensive manner possible.

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

SOMSD has an incredibly important responsibility — and a clear obligation — to meet the needs of all its students, that includes timely attention to changing needs of the children in its purview, whether the individual is subject to an IEP or a 504 Plan. As the education of children is the district’s primary directive, there should be no question that prompt, comprehensive and expert attention to its students maintains the highest priority on a day-to-day and long-term basis. I would like to see a senior administration official, perhaps an assistant superintendent, take personal responsibility for the deployment of resources for those students in need. Accountability also means looking forward, evaluating what improvements have been effective, and incorporating those efforts where appropriate.

**Christopher Trzaska**

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

For the 10+ years my kids have been attending school in SOMSD I have not had direct interaction with the Special Services Department, and thus hands-on experience with the myriad long-standing issues facing parents and children in this arena has been reduced to Board meetings and updates, and the general sense of disbelief I experience when talking with friends and neighbors about the latest goings-on. What I have learned in recent weeks from Special Education parents has been revelatory at levels I never expected-- stories of roadblocks and frustration, delays and inconsistencies, and struggles to meet at times even the most basic of educational needs that many parents quite often take for granted. BOE ears need to remain open to these stories. Mine will be so. I remain willing to direct a culture of standardization and consistency from our incoming superintendent down throughout the department, complemented by the aggressive use of data collection and analysis to determine the effectiveness of individual and group programs, service levels provided by paras, measurable IEP goals and standardized eligibility determinations, and on. Standard Operating Procedures are a must. Upcoming policy reviews are a critical BOE task for 2019, and it is with policy where the Board has the most discretion, to be exercised in this case critically and liberally, and with input from SEPAC (starting with the 504 policy). Budgetary constraints have been the bane of Special Ed in this district for ages, back even before the staff was cut and paras were outsourced to fix shortfalls, and should be something squarely on the BOE’s list of funding considerations for specific detailed review during the annual budget process (something I’ve considerable experience doing at the corporate level). The current percentages of funds allocated for OOD placements cannot remain the new normal, discussed in a bit more detail below.

**Special Education Administration has begun taking several steps to improve services in district schools with the goal of reducing reliance on out-of-district placements to serve our most at-risk students. What are your thoughts on these steps, and what should the Administrations priorities be?**

The Administration needs to maintain two complementary priorities with regard to OOD placements: cost containment and the serving of as many OOD children as possible in-district, and the BOE needs to hold the superintendent accountable for achieving progress on both fronts. The current baseline is simply not at all sustainable, with over 10% of the overall SOMSD (not just Special Ed) budget being allocated to OOD placements, along with well more than half of the district’s overall transportation spend. That said, for once Special Ed is not experiencing the cuts of programs and staff of years past given welcome news on staff being added instead of the other way around. The strengthening of programs and support services are also critical keys to facilitating the return of students to the district, along with requisite training and professional development. All in, I strongly believe that future efforts to redline the SOMSD budget should reveal the resultant savings, a considerable portion of which should be pushed back into Special Ed for additional staff, training and program enhancements.