



2018 Board of Education Election Questionnaire

Questions and Candidates' Responses

Question 1: How would you propose to increase the number of Black teachers in the district, and specifically, the presence of Black teachers?

Marian Cutler

The most direct way to increase the number of Black teachers in our District is to prioritize such hires. Not intended to be cavalier, but if we demand this as a practice from our Superintendent, it will become ingrained into our administrative DNA. When a position becomes available in our District, before an offer is made the BOE must know who was considered and why they were not offered the position. This is a simple step of checks and balance to ensure we are actively searching for highly qualified teachers that truly reflect the diversity of our District along demographic lines that mirror our families and students.

More specifically, one of my top priorities is proactive and aggressively attacking our achievement gap. My mandate, once joining the BOE, is to put in place a full-time, staff member as an Assistant Superintendent of Performance who will spend every single day living, eating and breathing our performance on a district level, on a grade level, on a teacher level. They will be the engine driving Mr. Roth to dig into our data, to find the signals to chase the data "noise" so we can understand why and where we are failing our kids. Part of their role should be focused on diversity, belonging, inclusion. They would have a seat at the table to look at all policies, hiring decisions and processes, structures, curriculum, from the lens of diversity and inclusion that span K-12. This Assistant Superintendent would have a voice in a wide range of issues -- curriculum development, support structures that are needed, ideally supervisor of a mentorship program that spans CHS and middle schools (using MAC as a starting point, but building it out into something spectacular) and hiring.

Javier Farfan

It's all about effective recruitment of people. I have done a lot of that as a senior marketing executive for companies like Viacom, Microsoft and Pepsico. You have to go looking for people and not expect them to come to you.

And you have to make sure your hiring process is fair, and most importantly, that the job descriptions emphasize certain things that teachers of color are highly likely to have, like the ability to engage all kids, to challenge all kids, to be successful with all kids.

I would go looking among my contacts in the New York public school system, starting with the public high school I helped to start in 2005 to serve young women from disadvantaged neighborhoods all over the city. And we need to get everyone else, including our existing teachers and administrators of color and community members to help us build that network.

And you need to have that network of possibilities in place before the openings occur. To convince people to leave their current job and come to work with you, you need to show that your company will provide all of the things necessary to make a new employee successful, even in the face of the negative attitudes that people of color still face in corporate settings some time. So, a lot of effective recruitment means you actually have to turn around and put in place all of the supports that are probably missing.

And one of those supports is an effective chain-of-command so that a person of color has someone to go to if they find themselves in a completely unmanageable situation.

But we can't recruit people and then expect them to have to cope with a lot of hostility. So we need principals who will make them welcome, who will not tolerate hostility, whether overt or subtle, toward students or teachers of color. We need principals who see themselves as making their schools into places where all children are served well. That may mean changing the attitudes of some of their existing teachers or eventually replacing those teachers who refuse to change their attitudes.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

- Although the BOE is not directly responsible for hiring teachers, the BOE is responsible in setting the district vision with the Superintendent. We will engage with the BOE members to focus on a clear vision and strategic plan for hiring Black teachers.
- The strategic plan should budget for outside recruitment agency fees (contingency search, not retained search).
 - By engaging an outside firm, we can set expectations that request the pool of candidates recruited and presented for interview include no less than 50% teachers of Color.

- The plan will also have a retention and professional development mandate for current teachers of color in the district. We need to work with the teachers' union to make sure this is not only for teachers of color but all teachers.
- With the approval from the teacher's union, we would like to offer a referral fee bonus for any teacher who refers a teacher for hire in district. This can increase the potential candidates of all races to the district.

We will strongly recommend the Administration set up a formal mentorship for current and new black teachers.

Annemarie Maini

We need to recruit more intentionally and strategically and we need to create an environment where teachers of color, once hired, can thrive over the long term. We can advertise open positions strategically in channels that are likely to reach teachers of color, but that only really attracts people who are already looking. We need to find the people we want to hire (well in advance of the spring/summer recruiting season) and engage with them. Finding good teachers who are not in the job market is not hard. We need to work with existing people of color who work in the district -- both principals and teachers -- as well as members of the community to identify great teachers we want to recruit. And we need to connect with national and regional organizations of teachers of color as a way to connect with educators of color who are looking to come to a district where they can positively influence student's school experience in a diverse community.

We need to make sure that the pool of people from which we hire is reflective of our community. It can be done. The principal at MMS was intentional in hiring and attracting teachers of color which has resulted in improvements in the diversity of the MMS teaching staff.

In order to retain great staff once they are hired, I propose that we need to create an environment where all teachers are valued and respected, with a culture of mentoring and growing talent with real leadership opportunities, and a focus on leveraging diverse views and experiences. Creating this culture and environment will not only attract teachers of color but will also ensure that we retain great talent in our district. At the Montclair Urban Educators conference this spring, one of the panel discussions addressed the concern of teachers of color being assigned "those" students and also being stifled in creating programming that would leverage the diversity of expression. This disconnect between administration hiring for diversity and subsequent decision making that does not create an environment where a district is leveraging the power of diverse experiences and ways of viewing the world for the benefit of the entire school community.

This also means that we need to ensure that all students, particularly students of color and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are respected and valued, feel safe in

their classrooms, and are encouraged and supported to pursue their passions and achieve at the highest levels. If a teacher of color is surrounded by peers who are consistently undermining young children and their families based on their skin color, economic status or a perceived value of education, then that teacher will also not feel welcome, safe, and valued. This means the district must continue to invest in programs and training that provide space for teachers to question and probe their own practices and biases for continuous improvement. However, at some point, if a teacher is consistently and persistently not creating an environment of trust and respect with children and colleagues, then this resistance to equity needs to be addressed. For the past four years districts have empowered building leaders to use an effective evaluation process to support change in their buildings, and that includes teachers with tenure. Our district's teacher evaluation process must include an emphasis on what we value: respecting all children, embracing diversity, and creating a learning environment that supports all children.

The district also needs to work with the local teacher preparatory programs to ensure that they are attracting and preparing a diverse teacher pool of educators. Seton Hall has approached the district to work with high school students who may be interested in education and then supporting and mentoring them through high school and into college. I am confident that pursuing this type of program, and expanding it to other colleges, will support our students and will increase the diversity of our teacher pool over time. We also must continue to push our legislatures to re-examine the barriers to entry for teacher preparatory courses at the college level. The state has required all teacher preparatory programs to limit access to their teacher preparatory programs to students that have passed the Praxis Test. This is a barrier to the education field that particularly disadvantages students of color and students from low-income families (these tests have been shown to be inherently biased and also are expensive.)

Bruno J. Navarro

There are at least three things that the district must prioritize — as part of a broader, ongoing strategy — in order to increase the number of Black teachers in SOMSD schools: Recruitment efforts, professional development, and in-district support. Educational conferences and college campus job fairs, particularly at historically Black colleges, can be a starting point for getting the word out that diversity matters to the district. Beyond that, greater cooperation and dialogue with groups such as the National Alliance of Black School Educators to help the district shape a strategy for recruiting and supporting teachers of color, including Black and Latino educators. This issue is more widespread than within just our district, so it will require an ongoing, multi-year effort to begin to change things. In the meantime, the district can evaluate diversity training programs for administrators, principals and teachers — and even Board of Education members — in order to create a more supportive, nurturing environment for all teachers, especially new recruits. The district can also look at adapting successful initiatives such as NYC Men Teach, which “helps men of color through the entire certification

process, provides them with mentorship and training to transition into the field, and has cultivated a community of Black male teachers who are in the education workforce.” Finally, Black teachers who are recruited to the district must have a support system established, whether in the form of an ombudsman to listen to their concerns, or an assistant superintendent tasked with measurable goals for increasing minority staff levels. Recruiting Black teachers is only part of the equation. The support and nurturing of their careers is another equally important component, and we need to respect and empower them.

Christopher Trzaska

In short, and not to oversimplify, but this really comes only with concerted and consistent pressure by the BOE on the superintendent to ensure this is kept front of mind during the regular hiring process. That said, this is not accomplished without necessary areas of proactive measures to be taken, not least as part of the search and interview processes being conducted now and in the near future for our next permanent superintendent, who should be a proven leader in recruitment across not only all levels of staff but across a representative demographic spectrum. The BOE isn’t directly overseeing hiring, but it can and should demand and publish a defined plan with accountabilities, can assuredly review proposed hires to ensure searches were appropriately inclusive and push back when necessary, and include targeted percentage increases as part of the overall performance bonus calculation. That white teachers grossly outnumber Black teachers across the national spectrum isn’t to be taken as a sign the task is impossible here, but rather that it will take more of a non-standard approach to achieve an increase; the NY metro area has not a few schools who might be partnered with for undergraduate and graduate work in-district, and most importantly for post-graduation recruitment, as an example of potential pipelines.

Question 2: What strategies would you propose to decrease the use of disciplinary measures that have driven racial disparities in in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions?

Marian Cutler

As a first step, removing Principal Aaron over the summer was a good starting point. But, moving pieces is not enough. We need to understand the “why” behind the startling data in our schools in terms of how teachers refer students to the principal's office for disciplinary action. And, the place to start is with hearing directly from students and educators. I’d recommend creating working groups of students and teachers to dig into the narratives behind this reality; meaning, what do teachers say about discipline problems (both specific and case-specific) and the same in reverse from the students.

Additionally, the Assistant Superintendent of Performance, as their role in diversity would be charged with shedding sunlight on the issue with the guidance to change our trajectory. By infusing a single point of accountability for the disciplinary habits of our teachers, we will have

clarity beyond the data points including the how, why and who. All of which will help frame our solutions in terms of culture and climate or teacher-specific bias training.

Javier Farfan

The rules about what punishments are given for what behaviors needs to be crystal clear and the Board needs to see reports of exactly what punishments are given when a kid breaks the rules. And we need to make sure that all kids are judged the same way when it comes to the reports of what rules were broken. It is a requirement but I am not sure it is always followed that administrators inform parents when something occurs and give them a chance to be involved. We need to make that happens all the time.

More than all this, we need to make teachers more relaxed with kids and get them to de-escalate problems when they occur, rather than making a Federal case about it. That gets back to the question of how well the principal is in getting their staff to see all kids the same way, to eliminate the biases that teachers bring with them to the job.

In high school, I was a kid who maybe broke (more than) a few rules, and I was lucky enough that there were teachers who worked at getting me to stop, without a lot of punishment. They did it in a way that got me back to being a good student and that's how I ended up being able to get into a good college. So, it all gets back to trying to get all teachers to see it as their job to keep trying to work with kids and build trust and be able to talk to them. So, the Board needs to make sure that we have principals that are seeking to make that the norm for how their teachers do their jobs.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

- We would engage fellow BOE members to set a strategic plan with the Superintendent to increase professional development for our teachers and administration on implicit and unconscious bias. The relationship between students and teachers is critical and being able to understand our biases will improve interactions and conscious decisions.
- Our district does not have adequate social service support. We would recommend hiring more social workers that support the Elementary schools and High school.

Partner with non-profit organizations like the Pacific Education Group; who can provide complete and purposeful professional development in areas that we deem perpetually problematic.

Annemarie Maini

The district, as part of the Access and Equity Policy Implementation Plan, revised the Student Code of Conduct to reduce the disciplinary actions associated with certain behaviors and to formalize the expectation of infusing restorative practices in our schools. The administration worked with community partners, teachers and building leaders to reframe expectations of

behavior and the approach to assigning discipline. The committee recommended reducing the behaviors that would be escalated out of the classroom and into a discipline cycle. This will reduce the raw number of suspensions overall. The next step is to monitor the implementation and identify the patterns of behavior among students. This will allow administration to see how the adults in the building can improve the environment for all students and that in turn will preempt poor behavior choices.

But we also need to monitor whether discipline referrals by staff indicate a pattern of bias. The district's implementation of a data warehouse will allow the Superintendent and the Board to get regular reports and identify more detailed patterns to inform training or other teacher supports and to frame those "difficult" conversations that lead to change.

The district is in the midst of a three-year Restorative Practices professional development initiative. Staff members are participating in a bi-monthly training program throughout the school year. Research indicates that restorative practices can significantly reduce the discipline gap because the adults in the building have positive relationships with children that (in the eyes of the child) are worth preserving and repairing. We must create an environment where all children are respected and valued, feel safe in their classrooms, and are encouraged and supported to pursue their passions and achieve at the highest levels. This must be accompanied by adults who understand that children make mistakes and that their response to those mistakes can escalate or de-escalate a situation. Restorative practices (after a poor behavior choice) only work well if there are prior relationships worthy of repairing; the adults in the building must have the opportunity and the willingness to invest in these relationships with all children.

Bruno J. Navarro

Any strategy must address two possible issues here — one is of unconscious bias that contributes to a disparity of how disciplinary measures are meted out, and the other is of the lack of a formalized position of student advocate. We can do a better job of creating professional-development programs that help us understand our unconscious biases, and address how they play out in the classroom when it comes to student discipline. Disciplinary policies need to be transparent and designed with the goal of getting students the help they need in order to receive the education to help them achieve their goals in school and beyond. Policies regarding the behavior of Columbia High School security guards — a code of conduct that emphasizes respect for students — should be another area that can be examined. The other component involves having a student advocate in each building tasked with hearing students' concerns in an impartial manner — an ombudsman-type role, perhaps — to give students a voice in how they themselves are treated.

Christopher Trzaska

It's in everyone's best interest—not least for the students involved—to ensure that students are kept in school whenever possible. To do so, however, we must first understand the reasons (for

better or worse) why each of the full population of suspensions and expulsions was meted out in the first place. One of the more glaring issues revealed when it became publicly evident that disciplinary disparities had long been broken across racial lines (outside of the gaps themselves, of course) was the lack of hard and contextual data underpinning the numbers/actions. A deep root cause analysis of the significant gaps demands attention, but this begins in earnest not with the more superficial collection methods of the past, but only with the rollout of the district's new data warehouse and continued sourcing and verification of the information to be captured within. (I remain unclear as to whether the district can refine whatever historical discipline data it has for fair comparison and a foundation for future trends, but if they have it, they'd better get it scrubbed and available for analysis.) While a case can be made for outsourcing the analysis to a third party, I prefer to have someone in-house responsible for all data collection and ongoing analysis—which would include that of all K-12 discipline cases with sourced data points carefully expanded to reveal the patterns and trends needed for a targeted effort to assign appropriate support resources and ameliorate the underlying issues driving those valid disciplinary measures.

While a more objective conduct and discipline policy (the last, improved version still has some inconsistencies and gaps in my opinion) would clearly help clarify the overall process and ultimately refine the underlying data arising therefrom, it doesn't go quite far enough to eliminate the subjectivity and potential bias inherent in the determination of whether a violation has occurred, how "severe", and what punishment (if any) should be meted out. Further to that point, and while I'm often loathe to use "training" as a catch-all solution for some of the district's more thorny issues, in this case there is no question that frequent and thorough anti-bias training needs to be a significant component of the district's approach to addressing this gap (amongst other issues of inequity). I'm open to hearing about who is best placed to lead that training and to its content, and would seek assistance from those members of the administration and the public with targeted expertise for guidance.

Question 3: Do you support the reassignment of students to K-5 schools to desegregate the student population in elementary schools, and if necessary, to use bussing to transport students to schools?

Marian Cutler

To be clear, as the Administrator has used purposefully confusing terms, redistricting is the redrawing of lines within the community to determine which school students are "zoned" to attend where "reassignment" (as used by Dr. Ficarra) is about the proposed 5/6 and 7/8 structure for our middle schools.

Assuming we aligned on the terminology, I fully support the redistricting, but it cannot be just about redrawing lines. It has to include adding choice to our schools such as making Seth Boyden a STEAM school and Marshall an ARTS school. It's important to have one magnet in each town, to ensure both the opportunity and disruption are shared across neighborhoods.

Without providing choice to our elementary schools, any redistricting will amount to simply reorganization mediocrity.

There are a lot of positives to redistricting, with the top piece being ensuring our schools mirror the makeup of our community. As is, South Mountain is dramatically different than Seth Boyden with 4% FRL at South Mountain and 45% at Seth Boyden. It's an embarrassment and the fact that it's been allowed to exist for so long calls into question anyone who's sat on the BOE and professed to be a supporter of social justice.

There are some negatives, but mostly around how the human condition does not like change. This requires a degree of communication our Administration and BOE have proven themselves to be complete failures. Thinking back to when we redistricted Tuscan and Clinton, we had neighbors at each other's throats and that was about the shift of less than 100 kids.

As for supporting bussing, using FRL as our socioeconomic surrogate to analyze the schools, I'm not sure how else to truly integrate our kids without bussing. BUT, bussing is highly problematic as well as it will require some kids to be on busses for 20-25 minutes, which means they're starting their academic day sooner and ending later. This also impacts families in terms of getting to work/train, the need for drop-off care, the added congestion on the roads, and so on. But, my biggest worry is the real possibility that such bussing would be offered as free for only the first few years and then transition to courtesy bussing requiring parents pay for it; which amounts to another "tax."

Javier Farfan

Yes, 100%.

As I have said several times publicly, we moved here from the inner city to give our 4-year-old son exposure to the wider world of living in a diverse community. We promised ourselves we would become involved in the community, and we did. And we discovered quickly that diversity is something that is not fully realized in South Orange-Maplewood and that we all have to work at it. Fully integrating the schools is only part of that, but a very necessary part.

I am also aware that a lot of parents are concerned about what is going to happen and don't necessarily see the need for integration and don't think it is their concern. I don't think we should cave in to those ideas, but we must take them into account. I don't think it will work if we try to ram a solution down people's throats, because once kids are reassigned, we need the parents and staff and everybody to get along and help make it work. If we are still fighting a battle once school opens in 2020, it will reduce the chances that it will work. We don't want to just change the color composition of the schools, we are doing this so that all kids are better served, because resources between schools will be more equal, when one school (Seth Boyden) isn't trying to serve a high needs group of students with the same class sizes. And we want all kids to have the experience of going to school in an integrated environment, making diverse friends and so on.

So, I am in favor of doing this, and expecting that the Board will have to stand up to some very angry parents saying very ugly things. But I think that the best way to do it is to allow some choice, maybe by having schools with different themes to attract parents away from the school they are currently zoned for.

In the end, we have to comply with the law, and we have to organize our schools according to what we say our values are. And it is the legal right of all students to attend school in an integrated setting.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

We fully support the desegregation of elementary schools, and we are proponents of creating, and fostering magnet schools within the elementary schools in our district. Specifically, we want the district to focus on Seth Boyden, which is still listed as a demonstration school, but include Tuscan or Clinton as it's building mate. In that way, we create two specifically themed magnet schools with particular areas of focus in order to attract all demographics. The 2017 statistics show that Tuscan's demographic is 68.1% White And 14.7% Black or African American. Clinton shows slightly different demographics having 56.8% White and 21.9% Black or African American. We fully understand that we have an issue in all the elementary schools, and that we have to redefine what our district needs to look like.

Annemarie Maini

The need for each school to reflect the community average is a state regulation, as outlined in the Comprehensive Equity Plan (CEP), and is based on the precedent that separate ***is not*** equal. The district is currently in the process of addressing the aging infrastructure; we must also take this opportunity to reimagine our elementary schools. The opt-in Seth Boyden model worked well for a period of time to help rebalance one of our district's schools; however, over time this was not sustained. The work done by the demographer last year showed that 20-25% of our students are already not attending their neighborhood schools, and this doesn't include Seth Boyden opt-ins. If one in five families does not attend their neighborhood school, we need to consider whether the current neighborhood model is sustainable.

But creating schools that reflect the larger community will not, in itself, address the inequities in learning across our different sub-groups. That will only come when the adults in our schools believe that **all** children can learn and are held to high expectations.

This means the district must continue to invest in programs and training that provide space for teachers to question and probe their own practices for continuous improvement (including but not limited to anti-bias work). Based on work by a districtwide committee in the summer of 2017, the district's teacher evaluation process (based on the Danielson model) **now includes an emphasis on what we value**: respecting all children, embracing diversity, and creating a learning environment that supports all children. The evaluation tool can be used by building leaders to support an environment that values each child. Changing the culture of the

schools doesn't happen overnight, but I am encouraged.

Also important will be the use of good data analysis (with the data warehouse) to enable principals to understand more clearly how individual students are doing, in turn allowing them to provide instructional guidance and support to their teachers. (We know that this is possible because Principal Bodnar and the Clinton School staff used data analysis to show improvement for all students, resulting in Clinton's removal from the state's Focus List of schools.) This data was painstakingly analyzed to find the gaps and to support teachers as they re-taught specific concepts and improved their practice. We need to have a commitment that all children can learn, coupled with good data analysis, and that will lead to improved performance for all students.

Bruno J. Navarro

I do. Having been raised and educated in Queens — the single most diverse county in the United States — I am grateful for having had a diversity of race, color, language, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and experience as part of my education. I sat next to children from India, Haiti, Poland, Afghanistan, Ecuador and Germany throughout my elementary school years, and it wasn't until years later than I began to fully understand what a gift that was. An unintended, and possibly immeasurable, effect of diversity is a greater empathy toward others, a richer understanding of historical context in current events, and the acceptance of varying viewpoints. No standardized test can measure such benefits accurately, and they have made a profound impact on my life.

That said, I think that when we are all given an equal stake in each of the schools across SOMSD, all schools will benefit, and we would be less likely to see buildings in such states of disrepair that we have caved-in ceilings, crumbling concrete steps, rotting window frames and heating boilers that look like they're from the 1800s. The district's facilities plan addresses those badly needed repairs, as well as address overcrowding and eliminate the "temporary" trailer classrooms that present a safety, security and health issue, along with falling short in giving our children the learning environment they deserve. We as a community will benefit from having to solve the challenges ahead when the responsibility to address them falls on all of us, and there are intangible benefits yet to be seen.

Christopher Trzaska

Not at this time. This is not to say that I do not support elementary desegregation efforts, however, which should clearly be a key goal of the BOE and squarely on the agenda of the incoming superintendent. At present, the only forward-looking options addressing desegregation available to the public for review have been tied by the BOE and interim superintendent to the district's Long Range Facilities Plan, with emphasis on the reconfiguration of the middle schools. I believe it to be too difficult-- if not utterly impossible—to simply redraw the zones within the district to desegregate the population (the literal and figurative distance between Seth Boyden and South Mountain is a challenge of the highest order, for one) and have

it not be an exercise in geometry each and every year thereafter. (Quite frankly, I also have a hard time with the vision of repeatedly moving assorted children about each year like nameless pawns on a chessboard, at least not without exploring options that don't require it.)

I also believe that we have both an opportunity to solve for the problem of de facto segregation and at the same time to elevate the educational experience of all children in the district. While the initial shift of Seth Boyden to a MI-based magnet school attempted to solve for this same issue, times have changed, demographics and future projections have changed, and the issue has become not one of action (which is now rightly inevitable in my eyes), but rather one of cost and sustainability—whatever approach the district takes has to be flexible enough to survive the ever-changing demographic picture in the two towns. I do think the original magnet approach was a good one, and my initial thoughts are to take it one step farther—with two magnets (one for STEM and one for the Arts) and slight redrawing of lines around the edges to provide for some additional stability if possible. There will still be bussing, of course, though I remain unconvinced that the timing and costs can fully be known until the draws are known. I eagerly await the district's proposed integration plan, and both the demographic data it's based upon (specifically its projections) and the cost analysis of the options contained therein, in order to finalize my opinion.

Question 4: Do you support the full implementation of the state-mandated Amistad Black History curriculum?

Marian Cutler

The fact that this is state-mandated coupled with the need to ask this question is horribly depressing. If it's a state-mandated curriculum, how can we exist out of compliance with it? So, yes, I fully support implementing the curriculum.

Javier Farfan

Absolutely. I have been told this is underway now for the K-5 curriculum. I have not read in detail about the Amistad curriculum but believe that telling our true history is absolutely necessary. The real question is not whether it is written into the curriculum, but what the implementation looks like. That is part of the bigger question of whether all staff and administrators treat students of color with respect, engage with them effectively and have appropriately high expectations. If they don't, then the way they teach content related to race will probably be affected. So, I think that effective implementation gets back to the question of how we evaluate staff effectively. Content expertise is one element, but how they treat kids and whether they have high expectations must be reported in their evaluations.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

We support the implementation of the Amistad Black History curriculum as it's also a critical part of history. It's important that our children understand the contributions of people of

color. Black history is a part of American History but it has been deliberately removed from our history books and has not been a part of our curriculum.

Annemarie Maini

Yes, I support the full implementation of the Amistad Commission recommendations to infuse the history of Africans and African-Americans into our social studies curriculum in order to provide an accurate, complete and inclusive history. This history is not a separate unit or topic; it is American history. It is not just inclusion, but infusion.

The district is currently revising the k-5 Social Studies curriculum to ensure we are compliant with the Amistad Commission as well as the Holocaust Commission standards as well. Similar to the revision of the 6-8 Social Studies last year, the administration is working with external organizations to monitor and improve the curriculum. This mandate is now monitored by the state in the new QSAC requirements.

Bruno J. Navarro

Absolutely. Without integrating Black history into the whole curriculum, we are failing to provide *all* of our students a full understanding of American history that helps to place current events and social movements into proper context. Perhaps one of the biggest benefits of the Amistad Black History curriculum involves the evaluation of primary historical sources, and doing so in a critical manner, which is a skill desperately needed in our age of social media and misleading information. The lessons our students now receive are so widely disparate that they might as well be attending schools in different districts, and this needs to change. Personally, I was impressed that kindergarteners in one class could recognize Rosa Parks in a photograph and explain her significance in U.S. history, and I was shocked that kindergarteners in another class received photocopies of a coloring page featuring Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and were told that he “led parades.” Only a curriculum that fully implements a more balanced and updated approach to teaching American history will serve our students and provide them with the tools to understand the world that they will inherit and help to shape.

Christopher Trzaska

Yes. The revision of roughly 140+ non-compliant curricula has been completed, and the BOE’s work should now move into 2019 with a focus on ensuring the district’s curricula is challenging students far beyond the minimum state standards, but is also representative of the SOMA community as a whole. Both the law and the community demand it. And, quite frankly, this shouldn’t even be a question—it should have been done already.

Question 5: Would you support budgetary appropriations for supplemental programs and staffing focused on aiding the enrollment of Black students in advanced-level and Advanced Placement (AP) courses?

Marian Cutler

I would fully support such budget appropriations. We need a proactive and aggressive plan to identify kids early to start such conversations about challenging coursework. If it takes investments in teacher preparation or additional programming to make those conversations productive and results-oriented, I am fully supportive.

Javier Farfan

Yes, I would. I believe there already are some additional appropriations, for lower class sizes to support the STEM initiative, but I would support more if what has been done turns out to be not enough. That is a question I would ask in the upcoming budget cycle in February and March.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

We support additional staffing and professional development to address implicit bias, and to ensure our teachers build good working relationships with our students. All with the goal of supporting additional enrollment of black students in AP classes.

Annemarie Maini

Yes, and this past fall such appropriations were made (and last spring the board supported resources to expand the library hours at the high school). The administration added extra teachers to Math and Science at the secondary level. This reduced the class size, as the teachers recommended and requested, and ensures that teachers have the opportunity to meet each child's needs. Administration also staffed the academic labs for each period (1-8) and period 9 is now dedicated to student support time with the vast majority of teachers on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. In addition, the administration allocated a guidance counselor to be in charge of supporting teachers and students in effective use of the academic labs. This guidance counselor will work with teachers and students to create a plan for each child to use the labs and to follow up with the teachers to monitor effectiveness. These are well spent resources and I am looking forward to supporting other initiatives that the teachers, building leaders and administration bring to the board.

The curriculum realignment K-12 that was outlined in the Access and Equity Policy is still underway. Ensuring that our curriculum is aligned to the standards and then using common assessments (and the other data available and tracked in the data warehouse) will allow our teachers and building leaders to monitor how our children are progressing as they master specific objectives. In my opinion this is one of the keys for success for all of our children. If we create an environment where gaps are identified and then addressed, instead of continuing to

plow through curriculum, we will be able to ensure that all of our children are receiving a standards-based education.

Bruno J. Navarro

Yes. Helping students of color enroll and succeed in advanced-level and AP courses is a critical component of educating the entirety of our district's student population. I also recognize that various seemingly disparate educational factors are connected, and such supplementary programs would be further supported by the hiring of more Black teachers, as well as by professional diversity training for faculty, and by fully implementing the Amistad Black History curriculum. None of this exists in a vacuum, and the more we think of adapting resources to better serve Black students, the better off all our students will be. As for the inevitable question of where will we find the money, I also believe that SOMSD must do a better job of advocating for the state to live up to its own schools funding formula, which it has shortchanged for too many years under a previous administration that harmed our communities.

Christopher Trzaska

Tough question. I'll be honest about this... I don't have a cut-and-dried answer for this and I've been struggling with it for some time now, even though one might find it easier to simply say "yes" and move on. I wholly support an increase wherever possible to aid the enrollment of Black students in Advanced (assuming any courses still exist at the level) and AP classes. No question. I firmly believe there's no logical reason why the existing numbers for Black students are where they are without a host of external circumstances (bias, levels, etc.) driving them over time. While some small progress has been made, no one ought to be claiming victory. None of this is new news, unfortunately. So as far as that goes, my answer is clearly YES.

That said, here's where I'm struggling a bit and could benefit from some further dialogue on the topic: should struggling non-Black students not be afforded the same benefits offered to Black students, and with district funds coming out of the same pool? I understand completely the damage done by years of harm inflicted on Black students by the district's actions and policies, and the need for some form of recompense in light of it and a means to ensure all students have the same opportunity to succeed at CHS. This would accomplish that to some extent. But given the phrasing of the question and that there does exist a segment of students who are non-Black and in need of the same boost to reach their potential, it would be rather problematic in my eyes for a BOE member to thus willfully aid one segment of the population and exclude another without establishing a pool for all students requiring aid in mobility (a pool which is quite easy to support). I'm unaware offhand of any programs or staff roles that are by their very nature focused only on aiding the enrollment of Black students in more challenging courses, but would be in complete support of any should that be the case.

Question 6: What are the most important qualities you are looking for in the next superintendent?

Marian Cutler

We need a superintendent who is passionate about closing our achievement gap. I fully believe if one of our schools is a laggard than we are failing all of our students. This is priority #1 and we need new thinking, intense commitment and an unwavering passion to be accountable and to dedicate the right resources to show change we can all be proud of and that serves our students.

Javier Farfan

Most importantly, we must hire someone with a deep commitment to equity, who has demonstrated determination even when they faced resistance from parents or staff.

We need someone with experience in districts like ours who has shown the ability to get things done and change the culture of the organization. The new superintendent must be someone who has a good network of contacts because we need to replace the interim appointments and hire permanent people for a long list of senior positions. This is an opportunity to really make a difference. The Superintendent must be good at hiring people who are leaders in their own right and expert in the role they are supposed to fill. That Superintendent should have a diverse network of contacts, so it results in a diverse pool of candidates.

We don't want a Superintendent who is learning on the job. The new Superintendent must be someone who supervises all principals closely, encourages them, mentors them and holds them accountable when they don't do what needs to be done (like holding their teaching staffs accountable).

We want a Superintendent with deep experience in running a school district, but it is a complicated job and we are not likely to find anyone who is expert in everything so I want someone who knows what they don't know and hires people onto their leadership team to compensate for that.

Most importantly, if I am elected and involved in the interviews of Superintendent candidates, I want to be really sure that the person we choose, actually understands what we face and is determined to change the behavior of those staff and administrators who exhibit various forms of bias that offend and demoralize parents and students of color.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

Our future superintendent must be an exemplar of the following qualities:

- A Strong and inclusive leader who has a passion for the education of ALL children.

- A proven mentor, and developer of strong leadership in administration.
- A former Principal who can relate to the leadership of all district schools.
- Will make tough decisions when needed, and take some risks when necessary with the best interest of the students always in mind.
- Compatible and comparable experience working in a school district that was as racially and socioeconomically diverse.
- Excellent communicator who is dedicated, visible and approachable.

Annemarie Maini

I am looking for an experienced superintendent who has demonstrated competency in mentoring and growing building leaders and teachers. And we cannot ignore the impact of an experienced superintendent to address the fundamental issues of a large organization where many things don't work well. So, we also need someone who has already handled crisis (building level and staff level) and has the attention to detail to improve our internal processes, and has successfully managed a district through a cycle of educational change. The most important quality however, for me, is someone who believes, and has demonstrated, that all children can learn and is not willing to accept anything less.

Bruno J. Navarro

The next superintendent must be a visionary leader and an effective manager who has a track record of assessing priorities, setting them and committing the resources necessary to achieve those goals. Communication is absolutely essential, a shortcoming that even the superintendent search consultant cited in his update on the process. (I wrote about it here: <https://www.tapinto.net/towns/soma/categories/candidate-statements/articles/challenges-and-opportunities-in-the-current-somsd-superintendent-search>) The next superintendent must demonstrate a healthy, profound respect for creativity and innovation, while also understanding the diverse needs of a growing student population. Essentially, our next schools' leader must be committed to Transparency, Accountability and Dignity.

Christopher Trzaska

Easiest if answered in bullet form and in no particular order...

- Master of the art of successfully juggling multiple wide-scale initiatives simultaneously
- Comes with a rolodex peppered with trusted high-level admins with proven track records
- Proven record of success in a similar district facing many similar issues, including narrowing of the achievement gap, integration planning and execution, facilities planning, budgetary constraints, Special Ed oversight.

- An effective delegator with the ability to roll up their sleeves, and knows when to do it
- Effective manager with a high staff retention rate
- GREAT communicator, unafraid to offer and receive constructive criticism
- As much as one can ever assure it... someone who will put down roots and stay for a while

Questions 7 & 8

Based on your knowledge of the data produced by the district regarding the disparity of African-American students in advanced-level and Advanced Placement (AP) classes:

Question 7: Do you support the discontinuation of ‘tracking’ and the elimination of academic levels?

Marian Cutler

By this point, levels and tracking (as it relates to levels) have been eliminated with the exception of math. But, for many in our District, that’s another example of a paper-only policy. At the same time, our District fails at any real ability at Differentiated Instruction (DI), which amounts to the removal of levels without the right abilities to teach. We must double down on training our teachers to ensure they can successfully implement DI and be prepared that if they cannot, they must be removed from our District.

Javier Farfan

At a minimum, I support the fact that there are no levels in the middle schools in English, Social Studies and Science. But I understand that many middle school teachers still don’t do enough to challenge all kids, so just eliminating levels does not solve all the problems by itself. It gets back to teachers’ attitudes and whether they really believe that all kids have lots of potential.

I understand that there is math leveling that starts in 6th grade in middle school, but the Access and Equity policy gives parents the right to move their kids up. We need to do a better job in elementary school to get all kids ready to take the same math in middle school. And we need to make sure that all parents know how the whole process works so they can go in and advocate for their child.

In the high school, I support getting rid of the lower levels where kids are not learning anything and I support the Access and Equity policy which gives every kid the right to take any course.

We need to make sure that all teachers are working as hard as they can to encourage all kids to see their potential (like my teachers did for me) and push them to take the upper-level courses. That is not happening right now. There are new support labs in place where students can go for help, but we need teachers to reach out to students who are struggling. Not all kids will voluntarily go and ask for help.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

- We support the discontinuation of tracking as we think it was a discriminatory practice that perpetuated the segregation of students.
- We believe students should have academic rigor and with the elimination of levels it's imperative to provide additional resources to ensure they are successful.
- It's also important that all teachers have continued professional development specifically in differentiation.

Annemarie Maini

I support the district's approach at the high school to ensure that all courses are taught at a standards-based level. For the children who have an interest in the topic I support the offering of an honors-based level that will address the standards but at a faster pace to allow time for extension of topics. I also support the AP offerings at the high school as they have become a standard for college admissions. I would support the administration pursuing college level classes with Seton Hall and Essex Community College to improve the course offerings and the scheduling needs of our high school students.

I also hold the district accountable for ensuring that all of our children at the middle school are being prepared to be successful at the high school level. The district presentation that the question refers to highlighted that even though all children in 8th grade take the same science course, their high school science selections are disproportionate. It is the responsibility of the middle school building leader and staff to ensure that all children are prepared and take advantage of the course of study that excites and interests them.

Bruno J. Navarro

Yes, although I would want to see greater access to additional support for students who need helping keeping up in level-integrated classes. Teachers also should be allowed discretion to use lesson plans that span a range of abilities, and a variety of subject matter, basing class instruction on a class-by-class assessment of interests, abilities and goals.

Christopher Trzaska

In a perfect world, yes. Here, not fully as yet, though only Math is left at the middle school (recently reduced as part of the STEM planning) and CHS may well be going into three levels shortly. While it would be lovely to say that all kids should automatically be able to jump into Honors classes with an option for AP should they choose it, there still exists a disparity in PARCC scores at the elementary and MS levels that shows the district isn't doing a particularly good job at preparing everyone for successive grades up through and into CHS, and doesn't have the funding and staff in place to aid students with the leap. Setting aside the issue of eliminating an option (non-Honors classes) that many families actually want for their kids on

an ad hoc basis throughout their years at CHS, I question whether or not we are prepared to do so at this point. Until we get to a stage where we can guarantee that all students are sufficiently prepared to be performing at least adequately in Honors and AP level courses, having spent the time and money on adding student supports, further work on the DI front, etc., we should keep a minimum three levels in place (College Prep, Honors, AP) in line with nearly all other nearby districts. That said, we need to find the money, find the staff, and get there.

Question 8: What strategies would you propose to support students in grades K-5 to prepare them for enrollment in rigorous courses in high school?

Marian Cutler

Study after study demonstrates that the achievement gap can be detected by 3rd grade. So, the entry point for intervention must occur dramatically earlier in our educational process. We need to be identifying who is starting to struggle in class, is it a reading issue, is it a bias issue, and apply solutions, services and interventions as early as possible. Those interventions could be better deployment of the Achieve volunteers, new partnerships with our towns for volunteer mentors, innovative programming with our two libraries (both of which are getting HUGE infusions of investment for rebuilding and reinventing themselves). But, the real solutions must follow the data and the data will be owned by the Assistant Superintendent of Performance who will uncover signals early for proper and corrective intervention. For the first time, we will hold our administration accountable.

Javier Farfan

A lot of people talk about the need for the curriculum to be better and I support that. But there are a lot of kids who have done pretty well for years with the existing curriculum, so I don't think you can say that curriculum is the cause of some kids not doing well. For me, it goes back again to making sure all our teachers really believe that all kids have potential and go in every day determined to unlock that potential in every child. And we have to have the management structure in hiring and evaluation and day-to-day management in the schools to make sure that is what all teachers are doing.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

Early reading intervention is critical, as we have to ensure that our students have the support and resources they need. Ignoring or waiting until middle school has proven to be detrimental to our children. We have to act early and provide more reading programs in our elementary schools. We need summer support and instruction for our students to ensure they do not lose the fundamentals they learned the previous year.

Annemarie Maini

We must continue the curriculum realignment of all courses K-12 as outlined in the Access and Equity Policy.

We must create a culture of continuous reflection and data analysis to inform classroom instruction. We must leverage the data warehouse to track interventions to evaluate effectiveness. We must also consider how to structure the classroom so that children can move through the curriculum as they master objectives instead of being tied to a specific pacing outline. I don't know if the answer is more multi-age classes or other more flexible class structures, but I do believe that all children can be successful if we create the right environment. We must continue to involve and inform guardians about the implications of course selections and the alternative course options.

We must ensure that our guidance counselors are able to create relationships with all of their students (without taking away from children who are dealing with a multitude of other issues) so that they can offer support when the child is struggling, can offer advice when a child is selecting courses, and can advocate for the child that may not have their own advocate.

Bruno J. Navarro

Just as the elimination of academic levels, to some degree, can help eliminate some of the self-fulfilling prophecies of tracking, giving teachers the flexibility to adjust the difficulty of course materials could provide each grade a taste of what they will need to learn in subsequent grades. Some studies suggest that age-mixed classes, where appropriate, can have a beneficial effect for young children, as well as for older students mentoring younger ones.

Christopher Trzaska

Studies have long since revealed that the achievement gap doesn't magically appear in high school (or even middle school) but manifests itself early on in elementary. It is here where the most important work on the foundation for academic success needs to begin (setting aside the benefits of pre-K for the sake of argument), and where we need to start evaluating students on a more critical and universal level to spot areas requiring extra attention; one of the easiest ways to do this by default is via true DI within the classroom, supported by ongoing and/or additional training in effective practices at the elementary level. In conjunction with a more hands-on, DI-based approach (REALLY doing it, not just a light-touch approach), we need to set expectations higher both of our teachers and our students. The simplest way to consistently do this across the district is via updated curriculum that doesn't just meet state standards but exceeds them, and at the same time challenges students while laying the groundwork year over year toward CHS. Done slowly from the early elementary grades through middle school, these incremental challenges and interventions along the way should provide a sound basis for all kids to meet an

expected completed middle school transcript that provides a path through to any courses CHS has to offer. An integral part of this, year on year, is data capture and accountability. We need ways to capture student data at the cohort level throughout their academic careers amongst a host of other factors and variables to determine effectiveness and areas ripe for improvement... and accountability. Without accountability this is all words on paper.

Question 9: What restorative justice practices would you suggest to make certain students do not miss valuable class time for minor disciplinary infractions?

Marian Cutler

Full transparency, I am too far from a subject matter expert here to suggest specific restorative justice practices. But, I expect the Assistant Superintendent of Performance to be well-versed and experienced in this area. As such, I expect they would have monthly meetings with our building principals to review disciplinary cases, trends, stubborn patterns. These meetings would lead to building-based, community-authentic strategies to adopt and implement restorative justice practices.

Javier Farfan

I am just learning about restorative justice and it sounds a lot like how my teachers used to treat me although we didn't call it that.

The district is trying to use restorative justice more and more and that is good. But if the underlying attitudes of some teachers cause them to see "bad" kids and "good" kids, then no separate program or training for restorative justice is going to have much effect.

And that is why, even if I sound like a broken record, I will say again that we need to make sure that the Board needs to make sure that all principals are doing their job in managing their teaching staffs. We can't expect major changes in the staff to happen overnight, but if the tenure cycle is four years, then a good principal should either get their teachers steadily improving or rate them in a way that causes their tenure not to renew. And that is the solution I see for dealing with discipline issues, for dealing with academic achievement and many of the other things you've asked about. It is not a bunch of separate fixes but all part of the same process of fixing the way that a school works and the way that teachers and administrators treat students and parents. And holding them accountable. I think Dr. Ficarra has started to do that in a real way, and the Board needs to hire a permanent superintendent who will do that and who will hire administrators who will do that when necessary.

Narda Greene & Mike Laskowski

Restorative circles would allow the addressing of minor disciplinary infractions while keeping the missed classroom time to a minimal. However, it's critical that our teachers have constant and consistent training and professional development in these critical areas.

Annemarie Maini

It is my philosophy that we, the adults, are responsible for creating the environment for all students to be successful. I would contend that there is no more valuable class time than creating a collaborative, supportive environment that respects and values each child. A child is really not able to learn and experience the joy of the subject if they do not feel safe and valued in the classroom. The only way to do that is to ensure that the learning community supports positive relationships between the adults and the children. I repeat, restorative practices only work if there are positive relationships worthy of protecting and restoring.

Bruno J. Navarro

In speaking with parents over the past couple of months, I have been surprised to hear of such instances such as SOMSD elementary students being made to sit facing a wall as punishment, as well as high-school students being treated disrespectfully by security guards. We need to do a better job of honoring the dignity of all our students, and this means considering a variety of options.

- **Conflict resolution** needs to be an essential part of our schools' toolkit for teaching children not just academic subjects, but to help prepare them for the world around us. That requires giving children the time, the space and the words to express themselves. Teachers, students and administrators need to work more collaboratively in this arena.
- **Service projects** that are age-appropriate can be incorporated into the range of disciplinary options available for minor infractions. This can involve volunteering at a location that has been pre-selected, for instance.
- **Creative problem-solving** might be yet another way that students can be made to consider their role in society, and acknowledge talents they might have that may not be evident in the course of normal classroom instruction. Build something. Write a song. Make a video. Make it relevant to the student's experiences, talents and interests.

Christopher Trzaska

I'm familiar with only the basics of RJ and some of its practices (mediation circles, faculty/student jury panels, healing circles, etc.) but it seems to me this requires a shift in thinking across all teachers and admins in a given building and across the district, in conjunction with the BOE and existing policy, to look at infractions in a different light. For example, should some minor issue occur merely between two students and which doesn't impact others as a result, but is nonetheless in violation of the code of conduct, this might be the place to have the two work out their issue with a faculty mediator and simply move on, instead of gaining a strike on the record and a loss of class time. In the grand scheme of things we should first be looking to keep students in class (they're students, after all) whenever possible and warranted, and not out of it. Teachers and administrators will need to work to eliminate implicit biases when raising

issues of discipline, and operate under a mindset that provides for a shift in the common default initial view of infractions as worthy of punishment vs. something ripe for resolution.