



2021 BOARD OF EDUCATION CANDIDATE STATEMENTS

October 24, 2021

To the South Orange-Maplewood Community,

We are pleased to share with you these **2021 Board of Education Candidate Statements** on Special Education. We thank all the candidates for taking the time to share their perspectives. The Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) is not a political organization, and it does not endorse candidates in any election. This presentation is intended solely to assist voters by presenting candidate views on issues related to special education. The views expressed herein are the candidates' own. The candidates were invited to provide written statements in the form of responses to four questions.

1. When staffing shortages (paraprofessionals, reading specialists, therapists, special education teachers) affect children with special education programming, the district may be legally out of compliance with those children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This both opens the district up to litigation and results in our most vulnerable children falling behind even further. What measures (such as policy or finance) do you think the Board of Education can take to help fill these positions in order for special education students' programs to be legally compliant?
2. When you hear: Inclusion, Diversity and Equity, how do you believe Special Education students fit into these principles that our district aims to uphold? And, how, as a BOE member, do you intend to keep students with disabilities as a part of the conversation in all aspects of the decisions being made?
3. Special Education students make up 15% of all students in our district and do not exist in a vacuum within the district or our school community. Please describe what strategies you would support to eliminate the silos that can develop between general education and special education?
4. Share any experiences, personal or otherwise, that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming.

The following responses are in alphabetical order by candidate last name. Responses are presented as received with only minor edits to keep formatting consistent. We encourage you to reach out to individual candidates with any questions regarding their responses, and we encourage you to share this presentation with community members who might have an interest in special education. Responses are also available on our [SEPAC SOMA website](#).

Please visit the website to learn more about special education in 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. [Early in-person voting](#) is available now through Sunday, October 31. **Election Day is Tuesday, November 2.** Polls will be open 6am-8pm.

SEPAC SOMA Board, 2021-2022

Malia Herman, President

Beth Cosentino, VP of Policy Initiatives

Nicole Stewart and Lindsey Stone, VPs of Programming

Kelly Mortimer, Communications Officer

JUMP TO:

[Shannon Cuttle](#)

[William Rodriguez](#)

[Qawi Telesford](#)

[Arun Vadlamani](#)

[Kaitlin Wittleder](#)

SHANNON CUTTLE

1. When staffing shortages (paraprofessionals, reading specialists, therapists, special education teachers) affect children with special education programming, the district may be legally out of compliance with those children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This both opens the district up to litigation and results in our most vulnerable children falling behind even further. What measures (such as policy or finance) do you think the Board of Education can take to help fill these positions in order for special education students' programs to be legally compliant?

The global pandemic has caused a staffing shortage not just in SOMSD but across the state of New Jersey and beyond. I believe that every child deserves to receive all the services and attention they deserve to thrive inside and outside of the classroom - that is my definition of equity. I also believe the least restrictive environment requirement implies that for each and every child, it is the responsibility of all adults in the district to use multiple sources of data to adapt their practices to create learning spaces that differentiate and target the unique learning needs of the child. I believe that the Board of Education has in their control to ensure that each and every child in our district receives a thorough and high quality education: high quality candidates serving in leadership roles, comprehensive policy and clear regulations, and most importantly good monitoring of the implementation of policy and student outcomes, and then the Board of Education must use that data to inform their financial decision making and allocate money to meet the needs identified. The Board did approve the elevation of the Special Services Department to an Assistant Superintendent position in 2019. Dr. Morana and Dr. Algeria, though short in their tenure, brought a level of professionalism, reimagined services and commitment to students and families that we have not seen in recent history. In my work on the C&I committee, I championed structural changes to supervisors and child study teams to better serve children and families. As a Board Member and as part of C&I we also began tackling the culture in our district of "not my responsibility" in examining the I&RS process. That positive work and their professional reputations brought high quality candidates to fill the Assistant Superintendent of Special Services, Ms. Budine, starting November 1st. This is a critical time in our district and across the state during COVID to uplift and ensure our most marginalized students have support and I have worked to ensure that special education is included at every turn. Boards of Education are the most regulated and special education has specific law and regulations. I do feel that I have worked in tandem with my Board colleagues to uplift and enhance the policies to better meet the needs of all our children. The board worked on revising the I&RS policy last month, only to table it for input from the new Assistant Superintendent of Special Services. There was significant conversation about moving the I&RS away from a student deficit model focus toward creating expectations that the classroom environment must be adapted to meet the needs of each student. It is my opinion that the Board has the biggest gap in the monitoring of the implementation of policy and related

student outcomes. We should not be waiting for a year end snapshot, a legal docket or a news article to tell us how our children are being served (or underserved.) We also have to build good metrics for measuring student achievement, as well as good protocols for supporting teachers that are not able to support their children at the level needed. I believe that these metrics should have not only a legal mandate, but also a SOMSD standard (where legally allowed), as the benchmarks.

2. When you hear: Inclusion, Diversity and Equity, how do you believe Special Education students fit into these principles that our district aims to uphold? And, how, as a BOE member, do you intend to keep students with disabilities as a part of the conversation in all aspects of the decisions being made?

As a Board member, I have been a strong advocate in my time on the Curriculum and Instruction (C&I) committee to uplift and ensure that special education and access and equity are at the forefront. Breaking down and examining the way SOMSD delivers education is key to understanding how we serve all our children. We must find a way to work with parents and other stakeholders to ensure that we are not only implementing best practices, but also ensure that needs are being met across the school community consistently. Historically there has been a gap in learning outcomes when comparing the special needs population to the general education population on the standardized tests. When examining those outcomes, Dr. Morano and Dr. Ficara recommended, and the board approved, moving the high school toward an inclusion model instead of the consultative special needs model. All of 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 so that every child can thrive inside and outside of the classroom. And that includes wrap around needs, transportation and safety. I will continue to be a strong advocate for the district leadership to collect and analyze more robust data on students' whole experience, as well as checking in with families in a meaningful way, to be shared back with child study teams, teachers, building leaders, senior leaders, and the board. I will be encouraging the board as a whole to task the Assistant Superintendent of Special Services to develop a robust data collection system and report to the board on a regular basis (with a timeline) what the district is doing to repair the record it has on delivering education to our special needs population.

3. Special Education students make up 15% of all students in our district and do not exist in a vacuum within the district or our school community. Please describe what strategies you would support to eliminate the silos that can develop between general education and special education?

As we move forward in our work with the Long Range Facilities Plan (LRFP) and the Intentional Integration Plan, the focus and lens must also be on how to best serve and support all of our students, especially our special education students, to create a welcoming inclusive school community. Our special education students are not an “addition” to that work, but need to be at the forefront of everything we do -- as they are all our students. Since my time on the Board, I have advocated for creating more inclusive policies and procedures, and for the first time the district has created new special education policies and procedures under the leadership of Dr. Morrana and Dr. Allergia. To move forward together, all of our key stakeholders need to be involved in order to connect best practices, policy, research and implementation. We need to bring 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 and leadership at all levels is key to both our special education populations, as well as the general access and equity policy targets. We also must continue to build support systems and ongoing training for all our 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 data and parent feedback to better inform the district. But none of that is possible until we develop a culture of care and respect that each child matters and that it is the responsibility of every adult to support every child. I believe that it is essential that we standardize processes across our schools so that families and their children receive a coherent and consistent experience across the District. Our processes should be transparent and our families must play an active role in understanding all aspects of any process, from the data, resources, interventions and practices used to support their child.

4. Share any experiences, personal or otherwise, that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming.

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 systemic and leadership issue in actively ensuring that students receiving special services thrive in our school district, rather than just fitting them into the existing frameworks. Too often the parents of students with special needs 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. My experience also includes being in inclusive classrooms with students of various abilities and needs and 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. As someone who benefited from speech therapy as a child, I remember vividly the positive and negative impacts of how my teachers, school administrators responded to addressing my speech and language processing needs and how crucial it was to have not only access to services but a champion in the school who understood and looked out for me. As a Board Member, I have used a lens of students first in all that I do: leading from an equity and inclusion focus on our policies, procedures and communication and advocating for and ensuring that we are looking at accessible and adaptive ways, technology and responses across central office, classrooms, and more.

WILLIAM RODRIGUEZ

1. When staffing shortages (paraprofessionals, reading specialists, therapists, special education teachers) affect children with special education programming, the district may be legally out of compliance with those children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This both opens the district up to litigation and results in our most vulnerable children falling behind even further. What measures (such as policy or finance) do you think the Board of Education can take to help fill these positions in order for special education students' programs to be legally compliant?

The district needs to do better at tracking loss of services due to the pandemic, staffing shortages, or other circumstances. In that regard, perhaps we can create an online tracking database which can be leveraged by parents and staff to track specific non-provision of services on a day by day basis. Since we are legally obligated to provide these services, by Federal and State laws, it is incumbent on the district to make every effort to provide compensatory education for the loss of services, or reach some agreement with parents when these lapses occur. Sadly the interruptions we are experiencing today are at times unavoidable, but obviously providing services at a future date to help the student catchup is morally and ethically the only possible solution. First step let's track what is being missed so we can analyze the data and make decisions to bridge the gaps. Our SE kids are perhaps the most vulnerable learners in the district, and it is our moral obligation to defend their right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE) at all times.

2. When you hear: Inclusion, Diversity and Equity, how do you believe Special Education students fit into these principles that our district aims to uphold? And, how, as a BOE member, do you intend to keep students with disabilities as a part of the conversation in all aspects of the decisions being made?

The impact and inclusion of SE students is paramount in any DEI discussion. They and their parents are critical stakeholders for any policy and planning. SE children represent every facet of DEI; their diversity, equity and inclusion must be maximized if we are to function as a just society who honors every community member and the contributions they bring to the table. So it would be morally remiss to not factor them into every policy decision and implementation being considered. On a micro level, we can mandate impact studies to see impacts on SE kids and adjust any policy implementations to ensure they are properly represented and, most importantly, that their IEPs and 504s are being included in any action.

3. Special Education students make up 15% of all students in our district and do not exist in a vacuum within the district or our school community. Please describe what strategies you would support to eliminate the silos that can develop between general education and special education?

I would like to see the 15% ratio be set as a target for inclusion in all areas of daily school life, including academics, sports & extracurricular activities, special events and other areas. It is imperative that we as a district make every effort to integrate SE kids and help them feel they are part of the mainstream. This might require that social milestones be inserted into the IEPs in addition to academic ones. My understanding from speaking with SE parents is that the IEPs and 504s are typically focused only on academic milestones, which needs to change.

4. Share any experiences, personal or otherwise, that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming.

Anecdotally, a neighbor told me a story of a child in middle school who would always eat lunch by themselves, because the child lacked social skills. This upset me hearing this as I listened to the parents heartache and describing how their child reported being sad by being left out of daily group interaction. We can do better here in situations like this. We should ask staff to engage more and ensure all kids are helped so that all their needs - educational, psychological, & social - are met. This will require some vision, engagement with staff and parents, and some out of the box thinking. We can do it.

QAWI TELESFORD

1. When staffing shortages (paraprofessionals, reading specialists, therapists, special education teachers) affect children with special education programming, the district may be legally out of compliance with those children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This both opens the district up to litigation and results in our most vulnerable children falling behind even further. What measures (such as policy or finance) do you think the Board of Education can take to help fill these positions in order for special education students' programs to be legally compliant?

When staffing shortages occur, there are various strategies the Board could use to ensure legal compliance. From a financial standpoint, and depending on the budget, the district could consider increasing incentives for special education hires, similar to higher wages and hiring bonuses used to attract bus drivers this year. Another policy approach would be to contact parents explaining what specific shortage they have related to their child, then provide some measure of tracking to determine if the lack of service affects their learning ability. Keeping track of any regression, then provide compensatory services once the position is filled. Following this structure allows the district and parents to work together to ensure their child receives proper service. The key here is that communication between teachers, special education staff and parents is essential to develop these alternatives and provide children with continuous support while the district seeks to fill essential positions.

2. When you hear: Inclusion, Diversity and Equity, how do you believe Special Education students fit into these principles that our district aims to uphold? And, how, as a BOE member, do you intend to keep students with disabilities as a part of the conversation in all aspects of the decisions being made?

Inclusion, diversity and equity mean providing access to students with disabilities. This includes removing barriers that can negatively impact students' learning experience. For instance, determining subject areas where universal design learning (UDL) can be used will provide access to all students. UDL uses a curriculum that is inclusive of general education and special education, which allows general education students multiple ways to access learning and allows students with special needs a greater sense of belonging because all students follow the same lessons. One idea that has always been important to me is that students should see themselves in their curriculum. In practice, this means diversifying the curriculum to include more contributions of people with disabilities, which will help to remove myths and stigmas about people with disabilities. More importantly, removing barriers to getting tested and the resources students need is critical to providing students with access to education. As a Board member, I will always

consider access to students with disabilities as essential to building an environment of inclusion, diversity and equity.

3. Special Education students make up 15% of all students in our district and do not exist in a vacuum within the district or our school community. Please describe what strategies you would support to eliminate the silos that can develop between general education and special education?

Strategies for eliminating silos should include policies related to curriculum, student interaction and staff interactions.

While there are certainly differences in the instruction students will receive, creating a more universal curriculum creates access for all students. Students should have more commonality in subject topics between their courses regardless of whether children are in self-contained classrooms or not. A more common curriculum can remove disparate experiences in school. Additionally, inclusion of people with disabilities or special needs in the curriculum can help to dispel myths that may exist.

Another way to eliminate silos is to create policies that maximize shared classroom experiences by using universal design learning (UDL), which creates lessons that are equally accessible to students in general education and special education. It is important for children to interact with each other as this helps to eliminate myths and biases.

Among staff, all teachers should be trained to interact with students with special needs. In addition, there should be regular interactions between teachers in general education and special education to foster an environment where students with special needs are not seen as separate from kids in general education.

4. Share any experiences, personal or otherwise, that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming.

When I started the campaign, I began to research more about special education in our district. I met with parents of children with special needs both currently in the district and with kids who have graduated. I also attended the SEPAC meeting held in early October. Hearing from them, I admire them for being the strongest advocates for their children. Coming away from the SEPAC meeting, I want to carry the same level of advocacy if elected to the board. One of the best ways this can be done is ensuring stability at the administrative level because this will allow parents and

the administration to build relationships and guide policies to ensure that students with special needs are being served.

ARUN VADLAMANI

1. When staffing shortages (paraprofessionals, reading specialists, therapists, special education teachers) affect children with special education programming, the district may be legally out of compliance with those children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This both opens the district up to litigation and results in our most vulnerable children falling behind even further. What measures (such as policy or finance) do you think the Board of Education can take to help fill these positions in order for special education students' programs to be legally compliant?

The BOE hires the Superintendent who runs the school district and employs other staff members. The BOE holds the Superintendent accountable by ensuring that all critical positions are filled as soon as possible. Staff turnover is inevitable, but we should minimize turnover for reasons that can be addressed. We are in the middle of a significant macro-economic adjustment with a nationwide shortage of eligible bus drivers and other support staff. As the more extensive economy gets back to pre-pandemic levels, this aspect of the unemployment/underemployment problem will pass.

The real question is why the positions are being left unfilled. If this is part of an average turnover, we need to apply standard procedures to alleviate the problem. If this is because of structural employee shortages because of the pandemic, then we need to get creative, triage, and hire the most critical positions first. If this is a case of economics and compensation only, we need to see if we fundamentally need to change how we hire and pay our district staff. What is clear to me at this point is that giving up and accepting that "this is the way things are" is not an option because it is not suitable for special education children.

We should not open our district to potential litigation and spend money defending ourselves when that money could be used to pay staff salaries.

2. When you hear: Inclusion, Diversity and Equity, how do you believe Special Education students fit into these principles that our district aims to uphold? And, how, as a BOE member, do you intend to keep students with disabilities as a part of the conversation in all aspects of the decisions being made?

Our district should accommodate and care for ALL students. Special Education students should have full access to facilities and the same opportunities as those offered to general education kids. Special education and disability must be an integral part of any and all inclusion and diversity efforts.

We have made an excellent start with the Intentional Integration Initiative. It has taken us many election cycles to get here, and if not done right will need as many cycles to fix it. As they say, "Perfect is the enemy of progress," so there may be some turbulence at the beginning. We need to be looking at this as a continuum. We improve every year. We need to define success metrics, and we need to be able to see how we are doing and understand if we need to make any minor course corrections.

3. Special Education students make up 15% of all students in our district and do not exist in a vacuum within the district or our school community. Please describe what strategies you would support to eliminate the silos that can develop between general education and special education?

Over the past few months, I have spent time attending the monthly SEPAC meetings and reaching out to parents to understand the needs of Special Ed parents and children. It has been a very learning and humbling experience. While talking to them, I heard about difficulty in accessing services. If elected to the board, one of my goals is to simplify the process of obtaining educational resources. We can accept the district's decision in most cases (one way or another) if the process has been accessible, timely, and carried out responsibly and professionally.

The lack of appropriate information is a problem. Many parents of Special Education students in under served areas do not get basic info, such as calendar information like the start of the ESY session or a change in school start time.

4. Share any experiences, personal or otherwise, that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming.

I do not have Special Education children, but many of my friends and neighbors do. I have seen firsthand the extra effort and sensitivity our community must have in raising thriving children.

I have had both my daughters in Girl Scouts, where all girls can achieve an appropriate badge for their ability. Many troops allow only a certain number of "abilities," and those troops are not as inclusive as others. Similarly, Special Education children should be allowed to achieve an appropriate "badge" based on their interest and ability instead of pigeonholing them into cookie-cutter achievements.

KAITLIN WITTLER

1. When staffing shortages (paraprofessionals, reading specialists, therapists, special education teachers) affect children with special education programming, the district may be legally out of compliance with those children's Individual Education Programs (IEPs). This both opens the district up to litigation and results in our most vulnerable children falling behind even further. What measures (such as policy or finance) do you think the Board of Education can take to help fill these positions in order for special education students' programs to be legally compliant?

Filling these positions is critical and while we are now experiencing a national staffing shortage for some of these roles, the reality is that SOMSD has not paid enough attention to retaining and maintaining adequate staffing in Special Education for an extended period of time now. The lack of evidence based reading resources, consistency in the quality of paraprofessionals, and quality of many special services programming has been harmful for many of our special education students. Our Special Education students need quality programming and consistency to ensure that they are building upon their core competencies and achieving educational milestones.

A significant 504 policy was developed in 2016 requiring data collection to make informed programming decisions. Given the BOE's role is to ensure the district is being well run, I believe they could be doing a lot more in the way of accountability as it relates to the district's compliance with this policy. Data collection has been inconsistent and incomplete, which causes a lack of strategic direction in program development. Without complete data, we aren't able to measure the efficacy of our programming to ensure we are adequately supporting our most vulnerable students. Data has already been a focus area of my campaign and I intend to apply that to special services as well.

In addition, the turnover in Special Education leadership is a persistent and concerning issue. Lack of consistent leadership leads to lack of strategic vision and implementation of policy.

In this district, our Special Education compliance is more directed by lawsuits than purposeful and intentional implementation. If we cut back on the amount of hours our special services team spent on litigation issues, they could spend more time on strategy and program development.

An ongoing issue in our district has been the outsourcing of paraprofessionals which has caused great concern about the quality and consistency of para coverage. The reason for outsourcing has been cited as the financial cost to hiring in-house. I think there is an opportunity to be more thoughtful about the school budget and where we choose to save money.

2. When you hear: Inclusion, Diversity and Equity, how do you believe Special Education students fit into these principles that our district aims to uphold? And, how, as a BOE member, do you intend to keep students with disabilities as a part of the conversation in all aspects of the decisions being made?

All students should be reflected in the policies that are being passed in SOMSD - special education students are not an exception to this rule. As a Board Member, it is my responsibility to ensure the needs of these students are represented in the policies that we create and in how we govern the Superintendent.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion policies and strategies should be at the foundation of how the district operates – and they should span all students. The Board can support this by holding the Superintendent accountable to ensuring special education students are represented in all key initiatives and asking some critical questions and clearly communicating this out to the community:

- Does the capital plan have necessary focus and resources on accessibility?
- Is the integration plan algorithm comprehensive in looking beyond race, ethnicity and demographics and considering special needs?
- Will critical support resources follow the students in the integration plan?
- How will schools plan for different population of kids as it relates to planning, curriculum and instruction, and supports needed?
- Ensuring that Atlas, the new curriculum software, is more diligently tracking special education curriculum which we know has been out of compliance
- Do our curriculum materials reflect the broader diversity of our students?
- Are we looking at the diverse body of our special needs students and servicing them well?

3. Special Education students make up 15% of all students in our district and do not exist in a vacuum within the district or our school community. Please describe what strategies you would support to eliminate the silos that can develop between general education and special education?

The largest achievement gap in the district is between Special Ed and General Ed students. When we talk about teaching, learning and student outcomes – we must ensure that we are holding the district accountable to closing this achievement gap. By setting clear goals toward closing the Special Ed vs. General Ed achievement gap, the BOE can force the district to put the necessary focus on the needs of Special Ed students. To ensure quality of care, superb programming and consistent implementation. The first step in this goal should be to attract and retain a strong and competent Asst. Superintendent focused on Special Education.

Communication to further community education is also really important. Helping to address some of the misconceptions about inclusion classes, interventions, etc. could go a long way in connecting general education families with special education families. Inclusion doesn't take away from education but rather creates a more rewarding educational experience for all children. Studies show that when Special Ed students are placed in General Ed classes, their academic success improves along with their sense of belonging and moreover Gen Ed students learn to appreciate all the differences of their classmates.

4. Share any experiences, personal or otherwise, that you believe are relevant to serving the students of our district who receive special education programming.

Throughout my volunteer experiences in early childhood development, I've had the pleasure to work with special needs children and their families, while volunteering for a lunchtime reading program, volunteering at an orphanage in Colombia and as a coach. These experiences demonstrated the importance of inclusion, SEL and effective communication.

I believe it is vital for our District to thread SEL (Social Emotional Learning) behaviors into the climate and culture of our district. I believe that our educational system could better serve all of our students if we adopted SEL in how we address one another and behavioral situations that may arise.

My BOE candidacy has given me the opportunity to learn more about IEPs and 504s, the evaluation process, the needs of our Special Education students, supports & services we offer, case management and the challenges our Special Education students are currently facing. I believe the BOE must ensure that the adults who interact with our children are the most qualified. We would expect nothing less from our children's teachers and we should expect nothing less of the child study teams, social workers and paraprofessionals. Ensuring we are advocating for proper training and support for these individuals may go a long way to delivering better quality services and education to our students.