



At-Large Candidate: Maureen Brody

VOTER GUIDE for 2023 FAIRFAX COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD

Fairfax County Special Education PTA (SEPTA) is a 501(c)3 advocating for special education students in Fairfax County Public Schools, their families and the staff who work with them. We are a part of the Fairfax County Council of PTAs and are members of the Virginia PTA and National PTA. You can read more about us on our website: www.FairfaxCountySEPTA.org

We believe that the Fairfax County School Board is one of the most important and influential government bodies affecting the success of the students and staff for whom we advocate. It is critical that our membership and others in the community are educated about the issues that concern our students and staff and the positions that all candidates take on those issues. For this reason, we have developed a questionnaire that we are sending to all candidates.

SEPTA is a non-partisan organization. We show no preference in the dissemination of our survey and in the publication of any responses received. Thus, all candidates were sent this questionnaire on the same date, all responses were due on the same date and all responses were shared publicly at the same time.

All responses are published verbatim, as received. Each respondent's submissions are published individually on the SEPTA website via individual links to each candidate.

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Question 1:

For students with disabilities (SWD), transitioning from secondary school into post-secondary independence is an extremely complex process that requires coordination between FCPS, local and state government agencies, and a variety of other public and private entities. Some examples of transition services include job training, housing, transportation, personal-finance management, professional internships, employment training programs, and college and career guidance in secondary schools. Fairfax County has a severe shortage of accessible resources and services for disabled students, regardless of ability (including, but not limited to, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and twice-exceptionality). *What are your plans for collaboration with Fairfax County government leadership and other agencies in order to streamline the transition process and prioritize funding and development of services for post-secondary students leaving the public school system, such as employment and life skills bridging opportunities, affordable housing, financial planning, and transportation?*

Response:

FCPS has a robust strategy, but implementation is not as effective as it could be for a variety of reasons. Those include a dedicated focus on transition from the Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities. For example, for the 2022-2023 year, there was no school representative on the ACSD for transition services to my knowledge, and it's not clear to me that position has been filled. Not having an advocate on ACSD is a serious problem, because the schools are truly overloaded with responsibilities and those without strong advocacy can get put on the back burner. For example, the 2022-2023 ACSD annual report indicated full knowledge that post-secondary transitional services are lacking, and sometimes egregiously, but the only recommendation is to "monitor" the situation. Our transitioning students need a champion who will interface with the business community and philanthropic groups who have or are willing to design neurodiverse employment opportunities. I have personally seen these work well and have participated in research into such opportunities for magazine articles in Leader's Edge. With almost 15% of our student population falling into the SWD category, post-secondary transition is no longer a nice-to-have service; it is a critical care responsibility for all top-performing school systems. In addition, it is a matter of human dignity. I will advocate strongly for an FCPS focus on action in

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transition services and would personally be honored to serve as an interface with the business and faith communities to get an expansion of opportunities and placements done.

Question 2:

Currently, Instructional Services (general education) has staff dedicated to ongoing curriculum development while the Department of Special Services (DSS), which houses special education, does not. Therefore, the full responsibility for developing individualized special education curriculum and resources falls to the individual teachers and schools; thus, creating inconsistency, a lack of fidelity, and a high workload for special education teachers, many of whom teach multiple grade levels in one classroom. *How would you address this staffing inequity? Would you support additional permanent funding in the budget to hire dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources?*

Response:

I have never been clear on why the individual teachers are having to develop curriculum and resources. They should be integral to the individualized education plan for the child, but I think FCPS should have a handful of IEP specialists who handle these evaluations and programs in coordination with the school instead of having each school build its own IEP team for each student. The process as it currently stands is cumbersome, lengthy, frustrating for parents and schools alike, and guaranteed to produce inequities between individual schools. I think centralizing parts of the student evaluation and curriculum development process with an adequate number of HIGHLY QUALIFIED personnel would streamline the rollout of appropriately tailored IEPs and create uniformity across the county. The inclusion of personnel with fluency in other languages is imperative. I also think that we need to start looking at the role of artificial intelligence and its ability to take standard screenings and student evaluation data and find or craft baseline IEPs that serve as a starting point for each individual student, with the understanding that human intervention by trained specialists will enhance the IEP based on interpersonal observations and interactions with parents, teachers and students. We need a dedicated FCPS staff to focus on this so we do not miss the boat and end up having to play catch-up.

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Question 3:

With the implementation of the Equitable Access to Literacy Plan, FCPS has been making strides toward implementing best-practice literacy instruction that follows the Science of Reading. Thus far, efforts have been focused on elementary grade instruction, particularly K-2 in the general education environment. Unfortunately, no explicit, consistent, county-wide plans have been made to allow this programming to be accessible to SWD who are taught in self-contained settings. Additionally, no plans have been made to address students (regardless of placement in general education, special education, or advanced academics) in upper elementary and secondary school who have “missed” critical best-practice literacy instruction based on the Science of Reading. Implementation of literacy instruction in secondary schools varies wildly from school to school, and even within schools, between Cat A & Cat B placements. Further, despite funding a new elementary basal resource for literacy, FCPS still lacks appropriate Tier 3 literacy interventions for all ages. Furthermore, evidence-based intervention practices typically require daily instruction, which cannot readily be achieved with the current format of block scheduling in FCPS secondary schools. *How will you ensure that all students with disabilities, ranging from students in self-contained Cat B settings to twice-exceptional gifted students, receive evidence-based literacy instruction with fidelity and, if needed, appropriate Tier 3 interventions?*

Response:

Block scheduling is problematic across all learners and needs to be revised for math and English immediately, and EALP for students with disabilities should certainly be included in that revision. That said, the failure to craft instruction that achieves literacy for students with disabilities indicates a lack of focus on the issue. While a giant institution like FCPS must have a standardized reading and writing program, there must be room to tailor reading and writing interventions for students with special learning needs. That means students must be evaluated for the mode of learning best suited for their needs and teachers must be empowered to employ those methods. This goes to the heart of my push for specialized training for these teachers and special ed administrators. One thing I'd like to introduce that I believe will be valuable in the near future is artificial intelligence for evaluating the appropriateness of interventions for students with disabilities. It won't be long before we can ask a computer to assist with evaluations of student testing and follow-on pairing with a mode of learning that

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is a best fit. FCPS should have an individual tasked with preparing the schools to use AI in an appropriate and effective manner.

Question 4:

The national teacher shortage is directly impacting FCPS, particularly in special education. Based on staff feedback we've received, we have significant concerns about FCPS special education staff burnout due to many contributing factors. For instance, assigning caseloads by headcount, as is done in FCPS, rather than by IEP service hours often leads to caseload inequity, resulting in students not receiving the full services and supports they require. Additionally, some special education chairs are still carrying caseloads and instructional hours beyond their contracted job description. Also, situations such as the 2022-2023 OCR agreement (regarding Covid compensatory services) continue to add hours and hours of work and tremendous stress on special education staff; teachers and related service providers did not feel sufficiently supported nor respected by central office administration throughout the process. *What will you do to support and retain the school-based special education staff (teachers, IAs, related services clinicians, and school-based administrators) who are burning out physically and emotionally? What will you do to help attract special education professionals to FCPS given the national, long-standing special education staff shortages?*

Response:

While staff shortages are troublesome across the board, the problem in special services--both teaching and admin--is at a crisis level. The ACSD has repeatedly made solid recommendations regarding teacher pay enhancements, paid training days, and development of those in assistant positions to trained specialists, with tuition reimbursement incentives. I love all of these ideas. Now it is time for FCPS staff to make the push, with HR and DSS taking the lead. There should be intensive interface with our general education students, NOVA students and local colleges to introduce them to the rewards associated with serving the neurodiverse and special needs community. A compelling training and compensation program that includes tuition reimbursement, career path planning, and work/life balancing should be promulgated, and a robust relationship with colleges should be established so FCPS's Department of Special Services is top of mind when a quality undergrad or graduate student is

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identified. We also need to be attracting a mass volume of aides who are trained in their specific duties of care, because specialized instruction needs in-class support. FCPS needs an ambassador in the community who is working with established groups to identify, encourage, hire and train support staff. I would support an immediate (funded) effort to accomplish this, and I would advocate at the state for supplemental funding.

Question 5:

What is your experience with special education, and what will you do to fill in any gaps in your knowledge about special education/disability/accessibility issues prior to making policy decisions that impact this population?

Response:

I have very little experience with special education except for my personal experiences with families who have children with autism, blindness, muscular dystrophy, brain damage from injury, ADD/ADHD, anxiety disorder and Down syndrome. I once taught a preschool class with two children in some of these categories, and I've read a lot and listened to parents a lot. I've researched and written on neurodiversity in my role as an editor. I also have a couple friends who were or currently are special education teachers or aides and have heard their stories along the way. It's a topic near and dear to my heart since we have had this in our extended family and I have seen the urgency and sometimes frustration and despair from the parents as they go through the FCPS process for care and education of their children. I do know parents who have been pleased with the care, so there are bright spots. But uniformity and teacher/aide support, training and protection is not where it should be. We can fix all of that, though. That's the good news.