



Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

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.

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

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:

While the School Board is not in charge of funding and providing services for post-secondary students once they have left the public school system, such as employment and life skills bridging opportunities, affordable housing, financial planning, and transportation, because these are the mostly the purview of Fairfax County and the Commonwealth of Virginia, I am very familiar with some of these issues and have long advocated for better transition services. I've long raised these issues and advocated to improve them, both as a school board member who has often raised the issue of needing to improve transition services to a parent with a son who just transitioned out of FCPS.

My goal for the next four years on the school board is to advocate for more joint partnerships between the county and the school system, including between the school board and the board of supervisors, to create a systemic and robust transition hand off plan between FCPS and the county services. These would require more robust transition planning and support at earlier points in FCPS, a long term mindset and training for counselors and case managers, more county services and personnel able to coordinate with FCPS, and more robust options

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

for students once they leave FCPS, and more funding from the state and federal government to fund waiver services and IDEA.

The Problem

Better transition services for students leaving K-12 education has been an issue at both the state and county level in Virginia for decades. Waivers are chronically underfunded in Virginia, leaving people on decades-long waiting lists, with only some at urgent status receiving support many years after they leave K-12 education. Some are well into their 40s and 50s before receiving services, with years spent waiting that could have been spent in gainful employment and independent living. We need more funding for support coordinators for CSB, more direct service providers and more robust workforce development and inclusive and supported affordable housing, plus stronger transportation options for people with disabilities in Fairfax County. I will continue to work with and advocate with local, state, and federal officials for more services and funding for adults with disabilities, as well as strong transition support for our students.

Virginia is one of the worst states in the nation for providing support to adults with disabilities (as of 2019, Virginia was ranked 39th among all states in programs to serve people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.) It is no wonder that leaving the public school system is commonly called “going off the cliff” amongst people with disabilities and their families.

https://caseforinclusion.org/application/files/2615/4690/0031/Virginia_2019_Case_for_Inclusion_Press_Release.pdf

Outcomes for people with disabilities is poor. In 2022, unemployment for people with disabilities aged 16-64 is more than double those without disabilities and only 37.8% of people aged 16-64 with disabilities participated in the labor force compared to 77.1% of those without disabilities.

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/odep/research-evaluation/statistics>

This 2020 report from the Virginia Board for People with Disabilities has much more information regarding the landscape of disability support in Virginia and recommendations. <https://rga.lis.virginia.gov/Published/2021/RD257/PDF>

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

While organizations like the ARC provide guidance and organizations like Melwood and Service Source can help, this is a drop in the bucket of need, and many of these organizations contract through the CSB for those who have qualified for the waiver. If you are still on the waiver waiting list, you might get \$1000 a year from the IFSP funds mandated by the Department of Justice settlement.

Virginia lacks both an autism waiver despite the skyrocketing rates in autism and a core services waiver, meaning those who could benefit from more limited waiver services, such as job coaching, independent living coaching, and more that would help them be successful at employment and independent living, do not get these supports and instead are left to fend for themselves. CSB case managers have large caseloads and high turnover, which makes it difficult to provide strong support coordination for those who receive waiver services, which doesn't even scratch the surface for support needed for those on the waiver waitlists. In September 2020, 14,952 children and adults across Virginia were enrolled for services available in the DD waivers. When you consider the FCPS alone has over 26,000 students with IEPs, this gives you some idea of the scale of how few waivers are available versus the need, especially since developmental disabilities are the fastest growing disability and as many students age out of the public education system.

While Fairfax County provides some self directed funds to families, this puts the onus on families to find and manage supports, if they even qualify for the self directed services. Add to that the staffing shortages faced by many companies who provide these services, which exacerbates the burden. Raising salary caps for service providers would be a significant help because even folks who qualify for waiver services cannot find support under the current fee caps. Increasing CSB funding would result in better support coordination services but in addition the state needs to fund more waiver waiting list spots and increase the salary cap for service providers.

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

State services provided by DARs are also underfunded, with waiting lists for pre-ETS and workforce development services, with Pre-ETS only able to provide services to a fraction of those eligible (last number I saw was 25% but I haven't seen a more recent number.) While Our Stomping Ground is working in inclusive housing in Northern Virginia, there is a general lack of housing options, whether supported or independent. Transportation options are limited at best. There is a lack of regional workforce development services and programs.

What Do We Need from Other Agencies?

To start to change these outcomes from the school system, we need strong transition programming and services, a strong "soft handoff" to county services, and college and workforce training support from the county.

It would also help if the county and state could fund more skilled vocational training programs for adults with disabilities to help open more job opportunities. Right now too often people with disabilities automatically get tracked to very few jobs based on negative perceptions of what people with disabilities can't do. Janitor is the most common occupation for people with disabilities.

<https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/03/do-people-with-disabilities-earn-equal-pay.html>

"The legend in the disability community is: 'food, filth, flowers and filing,'" in terms of available jobs, Colleen Miller, executive director, [disAbility Law Center of Virginia](http://disAbilityLawCenter.org), tells Axios."

<https://www.axios.com/local/richmond/2022/07/29/virginians-with-disabilities-workforce-trends>

We need workforce training programs for people with disabilities and ADA accommodations for people with disabilities to be able to access the certification exams. We need better training programs to open more employment options. We need plain language testing for driver's licenses similar to what Maryland just enacted to help remove transportation barriers. For those who cannot drive, we



Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

need more robust public transportation options and more training to help people with disabilities learn to use public transportation.

To address workforce and independent living, we cannot forget that we need to change presumptions and mindsets about what people with disabilities can do. That was part of the purpose of the Disability Inclusion Summit Fairfax County held in 2019 but has been paused since the pandemic. We must also address criminal justice reform from policing to the courts to stop the overcriminalization of adults with disabilities, especially since neurodivergent norms are not well understood by law enforcement. Finally, we also must address medical school training to ensure doctors are trained to work with people with disabilities. We need to advocate for affordable housing set asides for people with disabilities and inclusive housing options and social opportunities such as those created by organizations like Our Stomping Ground.

We need revised income requirements and penalties for some folks with disabilities who also need services for independent living or other support. Essentially the working penalty prevents people from being able to pursue most jobs. Even if they can work, the patient pay percentages are so high it leaves most people with less than \$200 for spending, thus eliminating any chance of a social life and the ability to make friendships and relationships. While there has been work in this area, Medicaid is built on the charitable model of disability rather than the civil rights model of disability. One should not have to choose between the personal care needed for daily living or a group home that allows for some independent living and the chance to live a fulfilling life of work, friendships, connections and partnerships. Think of Stephen Hawking being prevented from working because he needed personal care to manage the needs of daily living. Now Stephen Hawking could pay for it but how about the next Stephen Hawking who is amongst us or amongst our children?

What Can The School Board Do?

While addressing those issues is not the purview of the school board, we can certainly lift our voice to advocate with county and state officials for more funding for waiver slots and for service providers. I have a long history of

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

working with the ARC, and state and local officials to advocate for more funding and services. I've continued this work while on the school board and plan to continue to leverage my relationships with state and local officials to improve transition and other services for adults with disabilities.

So what else can the school board do, other than advocate with state and local officials? To start, we can look at improving our own transition services. The 2020 JLARC study on special education specifically mentioned better transition planning, stronger transition IEPs, and more measurable transition IEP goals.

<https://jlarc.virginia.gov/landing-2020-special-education.asp>

This is an issue I have long raised. Better transition services and programming has been one of my passions and areas I have tried to champion on the board, but there is still work to be done. We can ensure transition IEPs are robust and targeted to building work, college, and independent skills and that the IEP goals are specific and measurable. An audit of transition IEPs would be a good start to seeing the gaps. I have been advocating for and will continue to advocate for funding for more employment resource teachers, and for more dedicated employment resource teachers for middle school. Right now our ETRs are spread too thin to do proactive transition support. We need better training for IEPs teams on how to develop strong transition goals and transition IEPs. We can continue to provide training and conferences for families and students to help education them on postsecondary options and the transition process, including "I'm Determined" for students, but we can strengthen individualized transition support.

We can create a strong partnership with CSB to create a systematic process to ensure a "soft handoff" from FCPS to the County services. I've met with the folks on Fairfax County's Disability Services Board, which could be a good avenue to create the pathway for the soft handoff. The ARC could also be involved. There isn't a strong consistent partnership between FCPS and the County with a consistent and systematic plan for that soft handoff, which could help students and families better access resources and successfully transition after high school. I would advocate for a joint task force with the board of supervisors to better coordinate transition services and plan for this "soft handoff." This soft

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

handoff would require development of a systemic plan for transition handoff, working with DARs, CSB, and FCPS transition services to determine steps for transition starting in middle school. Of course, these would need to be individualized for each student but a checklist for a collaborative team that helped guide IEP teams regarding specific transition steps to take each year would be helpful. An example could be in middle school IEP teams and ETRs will begin to lay out a 4-6 year plan for transition.

I have been advocating for more robust transition planning at an earlier age. To do that, we need to fund more employment transition resources teachers (ETRs) and ensure our counselors are also trained to work with students with disabilities. Right now our ETRs mostly work with seniors, while providing training to IEP teams at earlier ages. Involving ETRs at an earlier age would help students get signed up for Pre-ETS services at an earlier age, accessing support and programming during the summer. It would also allow for more thoughtful transition conversations with families to help them become more familiar with resources and programs, help students participate earlier with workforce readiness programming with DARS and pre-ETS, and begin the transition between services sooner. While some of the conferences we have (Flash Forward, Family Resource Center programming for transition, etc.) are good starts, we need more individualized work with families and students to help create a robust individualized transition plan that is then embedded into the transition IEP and corresponding goals.

We need dedicated ETRs for middle school to start this planning with IEP teams and families (ideally upper elementary school.) We need to emphasize executive functioning, independence, self determination, and resiliency skills in core classes and during the intervention block. IEP teams need to plan IEP goals with a long term mindset of setting students up for workforce, college, and independent living success.

We need to expand and differentiate our workforce development and postgraduate programs, such as Davis, Pulley, and STEP. While these programs are wonderful and should be continued, they are limited in their efficacy because they can only be accessed by students who received the applied studies diploma,

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

which JLARC also mentioned in its 2020 report is limiting for students and poorly understood.

We need better workforce development and college readiness programs for all students with disabilities. Some of the things I have been advocating for included expanded EFE, EFEO, or WAT programs (essentially a half time STEP program) to allow for more full day programming similar to Davis/Pulley/Step but while also allowing for students to remain on a standard diploma path or to access while still in high school. A half time STEP type program (ie on a block schedule) would also allow students to be able to access academy programming, with access to certifications and skilled trades. We also need to better support college bound students with disabilities with more explicit executive functioning and life skills support for the college transition. We need better support for students to access academy programs to gain skills and certifications. We also need to strengthen community partnerships to have more varied job sites for students to gain real world experience. The county could help by being a partner for our students to work at county sites through these programs (ie EFE, EFEO, WAT, STEP, Pulley, and Davis.)

Students with IEPs are entitled to public education until the age of 22. However, our workforce programs for students with disabilities aged 18-22 (after they graduate high school) are only available to students with an applied studies diploma (by law once a student receives a high school diploma, they are no longer eligible for special education services.) This means the vast majority of students with disabilities who could benefit from these programs are unable to take advantage of them. The enrollment of these programs (Davis, Pulley, STEP) is less than 500 students but over 26,000 students have an IEP. We need to help create programs that allow students to work towards a standard diploma, if appropriate, while being able to access these programs, even if only for a year or two. That could mean creating half day programs, creating more programs before 12th grade. I will talk about this more below. Having the conversation in middle school about a 4-8 year plan helps families, IEP teams, students, and counselors lay out a plan tailored to the student with a long term view and transition planning at the center. The transition IEP could then help implement this plan. We also need to re-look at the programming and opportunities provided in our transition

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

services during high school and for 18-22 year olds to be broader to meet the needs of more varied students, from more opportunities for skill development, self determination skills, safety, executive functioning, social skills, workforce development and college readiness so students can be better ready for a variety of paths once they leave FCPS. And we need to strengthen community partnerships and workforce development opportunities for those who receive the applied studies diploma to expand workforce options for these students. We could work with the county to develop more workforce development programs that could be accessed by students during their time at Davis, Pulley, and STEP, as well as more internship and work sites within the county government.

We need better supported inclusion, especially social inclusion, so people with and without disabilities understand each other and know how to work and live together. Transition out of FCPS will never work if we are transitioning folks with disabilities into a world that is not able to include their lived norms as part of the norm of society. That happens through understanding and familiarity, which happens through inclusion done right.

We need to continue and expand our transition workshops and summits for families and students to provide information, which includes perhaps more information brought to schools, especially for students at a younger age. I'd love to develop a year by year guide to transition to include what families and students should be thinking about and planning for starting in upper elementary school.

Conclusion

There is a lot more I could say here (a book really) but I will stop for now. The reality is that FCPS cannot address most of the issues this specific question raises since most of these issues are not under the purview of FCPS and the school board. What we can do is improve our transition services while working with the county to create that strong soft handoff alongside advocating with our local, state and federal officials.

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

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:

Some years ago, I spoke with a group of special education teachers who lifted up this very issue. Many told me of the work they had done to adapt curriculum and resources and how they felt they were constantly having to reinvent the wheel. I mentioned at the time that there ought to be a central repository of this material that teachers could access and then adapt as needed to meet the individual needs of the students. I understand that special education material needs to be adapted to meet the needs of the individual student but that doesn't mean you can't start with a repository of materials rather than reinventing the wheel each time. Some loved this idea but we need to do more. I was glad that we also paid some special education teachers over the summer to develop some adapted resources and we need to expand this effort.

I would support having dedicated staff specializing in development of special education resources and curriculum and would support funding for these positions. Not only would this help with consistency, it would ease the workload on teachers who are already overwhelmed, and could help address the teacher shortage that is particularly acute in special education. I do think the best way to eventually structure these curriculum writing teams would not to have separate special education and general education teams but rather collaborative teams made up of both general education and special education teachers creating content for all learners, both SOL content and ASOL content, using Universal Design of Learning (UDL) principles so all curriculum is more accessible. These teams could then differentiate further to meet the needs of all students with

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

disabilities. We could then create adapted resources as needed from there. A central repository of materials for teachers to share would also be helpful.

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:

In the spring of 2021, FCPS decided to revamp literacy instruction to align with the science of reading. The equitable access to literacy plan is a five year literacy plan grounded in the science of reading with an implementation of daily, explicit, and systematic tier 1 instruction in phonics and phonemic awareness, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension, and writing. The purpose is for all students to receive a strong literacy foundation and was aimed to close long standing gaps in literacy. In 2022-2023, all K-6 began receiving systemic instruction in grade level word recognition skills and lexia implementation in all elementary schools and grades K2 began the use of decodables and skills based small group instruction.

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

As Dr. Reid mentioned in her academic matters presentation at the regular school board meeting on September 28, 2023, our implementation of this plan has already shown progress to include progress beyond pre-pandemic levels. Grades 1-2 iready phonics gains are up 8% from pre-pandemic levels, including closing gaps for special education students (16% gain for K-6 students with disabilities from pre-pandemic from Iready scores from 2022 - 2023.)

[https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/CVWS436ED9B7/\\$file/Academic%20Matters%20EAL%20Update_Sept_28_2023.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/CVWS436ED9B7/$file/Academic%20Matters%20EAL%20Update_Sept_28_2023.pdf)

As we celebrate these successes, it is vital to ensure all students receive the benefits from the equitable access to literacy program. While students in small group Cat A and Cat B receive Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction, with reading and writing programs chosen to meet their specific needs, we must ensure they receive strong Tier 1 instruction, including implementation of the equitable access to literacy program, differentiated as needed. I will work with my colleagues to ensure our Superintendent and her team are providing consistent and best practices literacy programming for all students and levels, Tier 1, 2 and 3, including basal resources as appropriate. Part of the delay has been waiting for the state department of education to release a list of approved resources so we can choose basal resources allowable by the state. However, it is vital we have basal resources for all our students.

We need strong collaboration between ISD and DSS to ensure all teachers are trained and use equitable access to literacy instruction alongside more individualized and targeted additional Tier 2 and Tier 3 instruction. I will work with my colleagues and the superintendent to ensure Tier 2 and Tier 3 literacy interventions are based in best practices and are being implemented consistently and with fidelity across the county for all grade levels. Our new strategic plan has explicit literacy goals, namely “students reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade.” The Superintendent’s public reporting to the school board on progress towards strategic planning goals as well as the executive expectations we have enacted will provide an opportunity for the School Board to have consistent and transparent oversight over our literacy efforts for all students, including ensuring the equitable access to literacy plan and corresponding resources are

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

implemented with fidelity and accessing for all students, including those in small group Cat A and Cat B special education classes.

As we expand literacy instruction to the higher grades as contemplated by the five year equitable access to literacy plan, we must ensure we are providing targeted interventions to older students who did not receive this literacy instruction. will work with my colleagues and the superintendent to advocate using the intervention block in middle and high school as opportunities to provide this targeted literacy instruction for any student who needs it, including twice exceptional students and students in small group classes. We can also ensure early adoption of the science into already existing literacy classes at the middle and high school level to complement the targeted Tier 2 and Tier 3 reading programs already used within those classes. I will also work to ensure consistency and fidelity of implementation of all programs in literacy classes. I will advocate to prioritize embedding the science of reading instruction within all small group special education English classes at the secondary level, which, alongside the intervention block and/or the literacy classes, can provide opportunities for daily explicit literacy instruction. I know that some Tier 2 and Tier 3 instructions included science of reading and other phonics reading programs but these are utilized on an individual basis per each student's needs. We need to better utilize the intervention block to provide intensive literacy instruction to all students who need it.

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

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

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:

The shortage in special education professionals is severe, with many teachers reaching physical, emotional burnout and struggling with workload issues. On the board, we worked to address this by creating and funding special education department chair positions at elementary schools so teachers focus on meeting the needs of students and not have to serve in both roles. While the teacher shortage led to some of the department chairs having caseloads last year, we have worked to minimize that this year. This is just a starting point and a drop in the bucket of need. This crisis in shortage of special education teachers is a national issue that needs solutions from the state and federal governments to help encourage people to enter the profession. Some ideas could be loan forgiveness programs in return for teaching for a certain amount of time, helping with funding for differentiated pay or bonuses, and intentional recruiting efforts to encourage people to go into special education. The federal government can also fulfill its promise to fully fund IDEA to ensure schools have sufficient funds to provide special education services as required under IDEA, which is a seminal civil rights law for the education of students with disabilities. We also need more education funding from the state. A recent report from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) stated that in 2021 alone Virginia underfunded public schools by nearly \$7 billion.

There are things that I think we can do on the board is work with the superintendent and special education department chair on reimagining special education program delivery and staffing models, both short term and long term.

In the immediate, we need to make sure we are including the voices of special educators in our policy making and in understanding the issues “on the ground” so we can address those issues and enact support and improvements. I know many educators have mentioned the need for strong mentorship programs, and

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

we need to ensure they are receiving effective mentoring from specialists and from their administrators. This would require improved special education training for administrators so they are better equipped to support special education teachers. We need to get teachers more classroom support, especially when working with students with more challenging behaviors. We need to determine whether we need more behavior intervention teachers (BITs) so they can be more available to support teachers as well as quickly address the need for a FBA and BIP if needed. The sooner an FBA is conducted, the sooner a BIP can be put in place, and the better chance we have to address the behavior needs. We also should consider whether to bring back central office instructional assistants who have a higher level of training and experience and can be deployed to temporarily assist teachers with more significant needs. We used to have central office IAs for this reason. With more provisionally licensed special education teachers due to the teacher shortage, providing more direct support in the classroom and better trained administrators and mentors can help special education teachers be more effective and less likely to burnout.

IA training would also help since right now IAs are supposed to be trained by the teachers on the job. This adds to the teacher's workload. If IAs were given some training ahead of time, this would reduce the amount of on the job training a teacher might have to do. Looking at pay structures would also help. This board extended special education teacher contracts as a recognition of the extra time special education teachers spend with increased paperwork needs but more needs to be done to differentiate pay and/or bonuses in recognition of the greater demands from IEP meetings and progress reports etc. IAs also work closely with students and the more training they have, the better their work will be. Many IAs have told me they would welcome more training.

We need to mandate special education training for general education teachers and administrators so they are more able to help. A strong teacher mentor program would help. Finally, we need to ensure teachers receive their planning time. I have heard from many special education teachers regarding the need to protect their planning time.

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

Longer term (although this has been a need for many years,) we need a holistic look at staffing models and program delivery models. The new special education enhancement plan and strategic plan can be good vehicles to do this work. We need to look at how caseloads are assigned with an eye towards workload versus numbers, review staffing models and program delivery models with an understanding of best practices and the changing needs of students with disabilities, especially considering the fastest growing population people with disabilities are those with developmental disabilities. If we looked at how we staff classes and programs as well look at what additional supports we provide systematically across schools and which extra supports we provide to schools who have programs that have higher needs (such as a crisis resource teacher in every school that has a CSS site) we could better support teachers in their work and reduce burnout. We need to make sure our teachers have the support they need from administrators and from intervention specialists, especially crisis resource teachers. We also need to revamp our program delivery models.

In addition, we are trying to put too many square pegs into round holes, which makes our teachers' jobs much harder, leading to some of the burnout issues. For example, the CSS sites were designed for students with emotional disabilities but yet many other students are sent to those sites even though their needs may not be met there. This places additional demands on teachers to meet needs of students they may or may not be trained for and in program structures that were not designed for them. We also need to look at our resource teacher model to ensure that teachers have access to support from any resources teacher, as opposed to the current siloed model where ABA coaches are only supposed to support certain classrooms, BITS other classrooms, crisis intervention teachers other classrooms etc. This prevents some teachers from accessing support that could help them. We need to ensure general education and administrator special education training so they can be stronger partners in educating special education students.

These are just a few ways we can help better support our special education teachers and address the special education teacher shortage. I think having many of these programs and structural changes in place could attract special education teachers to teach in FCPS.

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

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 am a current at-large school board member. During my time on the school board, I championed hiring a neurodiversity specialist - the first in the nation - and a twice exceptional coordinator - the first in Virginia. When I was chair of the school board, I worked to bring to fruition FCPS' special education enhancement plan, which, if implemented with fidelity, has great promise to make us a leader in special education. I also worked with my colleagues to ensure that before students with intellectual or developmental disabilities are questioned with connection to an incident that could lead to a suspension, that they must have a communications partner with them (absent exigent circumstances.) I advocated for funding extended special education teacher contracts and special education department chairs to help ease workload for special education elementary school teachers. This board also banned restraint and seclusion.

There is a lot of work to be done, however. I am committed to listening to special education students, families, advocates, and educators prior to making policy decisions as well as to lift up and champion change to improve education and outcomes for special education students. I have a lot of experience in special education but I also know that everyone's journey through special education is different so we can and should still learn from each other. It is vital to continuously listen and learn of issues, work together towards solutions, and advocate for policy changes or budget additions to implement solutions.

My special education background:

I started my journey in special education when my son was diagnosed with autism at age 2 ½. I will never forget that moment when the doctor at Children's Hospital in DC told me that my son was so "low functioning (her words) that I should start looking for institutions for him. Instead, through desperate research, I found the Parents of Autistic Children, Northern Virginia listserve, which became

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

a lifeline as I learned about autism, interventions, and special education. It was truly a trial by fire, with buckets of water thrown to me by other families walking the journey through fire with me, a story common to many special education parents.

My son was in the second year ever of the preschool autism program (PAC), a program that only existed thanks to the advocacy of many of those parents who came before me. Their children did not benefit from their advocacy, but my son did. I've never forgotten that. In the years that followed, I tried to advocate for not only for my child but for systemic changes that could benefit other special education students. I felt that is the least I could do given how my son had benefited from the advocacy of parents who came before me. My son had an IEP his entire educational career. He graduated, with much effort, with a standard diploma, in 2022 and now is a student at Berklee College of Music. He started on the VAAP track but was able to get back on the SOL track thanks to two amazing teachers. I've never forgotten them or how much our special education teachers give to our students.

My son spent his entire academic career in small group academic classes, from PAC to the enhanced autism class, to the non cat class in elementary school and CAT A classes in middle and high school. He is also a twice exceptional student, with an exceptionality in music. My daughter (Class of 2017) also had a 504 plan. I've been a long time special education champion.

I am now a disability justice advocate who now promotes reframing disability as diversity in a call for equity and justice. We must meet students' needs but we must also promote their strengths in order to maximize their postsecondary outcomes. My platform in 2019 for my school board race was "strengths-focused education," a concept that is now embedded into FCPS' new strategic plan. I've worked for over a decade to foster strengths-focused full inclusion of people with disabilities in education, workforce, society, and politics as part of the norm of human experience.

Before I was on the school board, I lobbied the Virginia State Department of Education to create an alternative method path for certain students with disabilities to demonstrate the knowledge necessary to receive a verified credit,

Braddock District Candidate: Rachna Sizemore Heiser

thus allowing them a path to receive a standard diploma and accessing postsecondary training and federal student aid. This is called the Special Permission Locally Awarded Verified Credit (SPLAVC.) I worked with the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, FCPD, and FCPS leadership to ensure school resources officers receive disability awareness training. In 2019, I conceived of and helped bring to reality Fairfax County's first ever Disability Inclusion Summit, bringing together community members, businesses, support providers, public safety officials, and more to promote disability inclusion in Fairfax County. It was supposed to be a yearly summit but COVID interrupted that. In 2020, I worked with the Board of Supervisors and the ARC of Northern Virginia to bring practice traffic and safety stops for people with disabilities and law enforcement to practice interactions to promote familiarity and decrease the risk of negative interactions. I've done trainings for families on effective advocacy and transitions, educational organizations on "Strengths-Based Education for Students with Disabilities," workplace organizations on "Neurodiversity: Cultural Competency and Workplace Accommodations for People with Behavioral Disabilities," and political organizations on "Disability Inclusion across Political Movements." This includes at the FCPS Special Education Conference, the National Education Association Foundation, Netroots Nation, and the ARC of Northern Virginia. I will be presenting at the College Autism Summit in Nashville this month (October 2023.) In 2019, I was awarded Fairfax County's Martha Glennan Disability Inclusion and Equality Award.

Before I was on the school board, I was the Braddock District appointee to the Board of Fairfax-Falls Church Community Services Board, an eight year member of the School Board's Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities (ACSD), a Board member of the Fairfax County Special Education PTA, a Board Member of the ARC of Northern Virginia, and a member of the Fairfax County Public School's Inclusion Workgroup.

I still work to support my son with disabilities as he navigates college and I have been working with his college to create a more neurodiversity friendly environment.