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**At-Large Candidate: Ryan McElveen**

## 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](http://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:**

During my time on the school board, the bridging ceremonies at Kilmer Center and Pulley Center were among the most powerful events I attended. Seeing the pride of the students who had completed their employment training and professional internship programs was always both heartwarming and inspiring. That being said, it is hard to fathom the challenges that their families face when working to transition their children out of the supportive FCPS environment.

My aunt had Down syndrome, and she passed away a few years ago at the age of 60. Growing up, in my interactions with her I learned first-hand the struggles with finding housing placements, teaching life skills, and providing healthcare for this special population. In Fairfax County, FCPS must share with the county government the critical goal of streamlining the transition process in employment/life skills bridging, affordable housing, financial planning, and transportation.

Virginia ranks as one of the worst states in the nation for providing services for adults with disabilities. Among this population, there is high unemployment,

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limited transportation options, and limited affordable housing. While FCPS does not have responsibility for providing most of these services, School Board members should be advocates for increasing CSB funding to address large caseloads and personnel turnover and support working more closely with CSB for the handoff from FCPS services.

**I support advocacy to:**

- raise salary caps for service providers,
- improve workforce training programs and access to certification exams,
- provide more public transportation training programs and more accessible driver's license exams,
- set aside more affordable housing for those who need it, and
- partner more closely with organizations like ARC, Service Source, and Melwood.

**In FCPS, we can do more to:**

- strengthen transition IEPs and their development at an earlier age (like in the middle school years),
- invest in more employment transition resource teachers (ETRs),
- improve access for special needs students to FCPS academies where they can gain certifications in trades,
- enhance focus on executive functioning skills and life skills, and
- increase access to workforce development programs after the age of 18 and allow for those pursuing a standard diploma to access these programs in addition to those pursuing applied studies diploma.

### **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*

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*permanent funding in the budget to hire dedicated staff who specialize in the development of special education curriculum and resources?*

### **Response:**

**At a time when there is a national teacher shortage and when locally our teachers – and especially our special education teachers – are facing more challenging working conditions, increased workload, rising class sizes, and mental health concerns, the goal of having central office develop special education curriculum is all the more important.**

**I support creating a central repository of special education materials for teachers, as we have done with the general curriculum. It is likely that providing these resources would require hiring additional staff, and this is one area where adding central office personnel would make sense. This issue speaks to the importance of breaking down barriers and silos between general education and special education staff in both central office and schools.**

### **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*

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*twice-exceptional gifted students, receive evidence-based literacy instruction with fidelity and, if needed, appropriate Tier 3 interventions?*

### **Response:**

**FCPS – like school systems nationwide – has much work to do to make up for the flawed reading education approaches we have employed in the past. The importance of returning to the Science of Reading and phonics education is clear – and it is especially important to provide these resources to special needs students for whom the Lucy Calkin’s balanced literacy approach presented unique and unfortunate challenges.**

**As a first grader, my daughter is lucky to be benefiting from the return to teaching phonics, and I want to make sure that students at all grade levels and ability levels have access to those same approaching. The School Board will need to hold staff accountable for rolling out these approaches and Tier 3 interventions consistently to all students – from those in Cat B settings to twice-exceptional gifted students – throughout the system. We may also need to revisit scheduling for these kinds of interventions, particularly at the secondary level, to ensure students who need them can access them daily.**

### **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*

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*and emotionally? What will you do to help attract special education professionals to FCPS given the national, long-standing special education staff shortages?*

### **Response:**

Our teachers are unquestionably our most important asset. Having a wife who teaches and a father who taught in FCPS for many years, I understand the myriad struggles our teachers face and the need to restore the respect of our society for the education profession. We must compensate all teachers at a level that recognizes their contributions to society. FCPS, like districts nationwide amid the national teacher shortage, is struggling to attract teachers, particularly in specialized fields like special education, and it is critical that we retain the teachers in whom we invest.

Special education positions, in particular, are some of the most challenging positions in our schools, because they require meeting, adapting to, and differentiating among students at many different levels. These educators are under increased scrutiny because of an increasing number of lawsuits, federal investigations, and an increased focus on the use of seclusion and restraint. We need to bolster our recruiting efforts for special education positions, examine the staffing of special education classes to ensure there is sufficient support for teachers in the classroom, and, as is the case for other teachers, ensure that their compensation, professional development, and planning time matches the challenges of their working conditions.

Addressing the ongoing teacher shortage must start with bolstering and training the FCPS Talent Acquisition Management (TAM) staff and increasing our advertising and partnerships with educational institutions. As mentioned above, this recruitment process starts with traditional partnerships with GMU, UVA, and HBCUs and must extend to new institutions, particularly those with greater Asian American and Latinx populations. The TAM issues are not limited to teachers — FCPS has long had a shortage of food service workers, bus drivers, and other support employees, and separate processes should be instituted to increase recruitment of these employees.

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I have been pleased to see Drs. Reid and Ivey personally interviewing potential employees at recruitment events, which conveys the importance of recruitment to the system. We should continue to expand the Teachers for Tomorrow program, which was begun while I was on the Board. The county has been proactive in allowing educators to enter the classroom while earning their credentials, which has been particularly helpful when recruiting career switchers. This process should continue and be better advertised.

### **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:**

Having previously served for eight years on the School Board, I learned about special education issues through my service and interactions with advocates and the special needs population more broadly. As leaders, it is important to admit what we don't know and seek to learn. When it came to special education issues, it was a steep learning curve for me — prior to taking office, I was not familiar with the many issues facing the special needs community nor the ways in which FCPS seeks (and sometimes fails) to meet their needs. Over the years, I have learned a great deal by proactively reaching out and listening to special education advocates and by attending and learning from ACSD meetings, SEPTA events, and annual FCPS Special Education Conferences. I will continue to prioritize these engagements and work to learn from those who know far more than me.