

# Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire 2012

San Francisco Parent Political Action Committee

We appreciate your time and thoroughness with these answers and will be posting them online for voters to educate themselves on your views and experience. Please return this questionnaire by August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2012, to [sfparentpac@gmail.com](mailto:sfparentpac@gmail.com). The SF Parent PAC may contact you for an interview following its receipt of this questionnaire. The interview date will be announced early next week.

## Candidate Information

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Please answer each question below in 150 words or less. If desired, you may choose two questions to answer at greater length.

## Qualifications and Involvement

1. Why are you running for Board of Education and why should parents support your candidacy?  
***I am running for re-election because, while we've made progress on our strategic plan, the school district still faces tremendous challenges. As a parent of two middle-school students in SFUSD, I've got skin in the game. Over the past four years I've been a reasonable and hard-working Commissioner who has studied the issues, listened to all sides, and always put the welfare and benefit to students first. I've consistently advocated for better communication and more transparency in district decision-making, and I've used my platform as a Commissioner to reach out to parents and other stakeholders and increase their understanding of the district and its major initiatives.***

2. Briefly state your experience with SFUSD? (Have you been a student, parent, educator, and/or advocate?) Please explain.

***I have been a parent in the district since 2002-03; I also served as a member of the Community Advisory Committee for Special Education from 2006 to 2009. I was first elected to the Board of Education in 2008.***

3. What do you think about SFUSD's Strategic Plan? Do you think its implementation is on target?  
***The Strategic Plan is a visionary document that inspired many people when it was first adopted, because it put into words a bold goal of closing the achievement gap, keeping promises to parents, and promoting equity across the school district. However, putting these words into action has proved challenging – partly because the implementation of the Strategic Plan has coincided with the prolonged state budget crisis and partly because transformation is hard in an organization as large and unwieldy as the school district. I believe the district is on the right path towards realizing the goals in the Strategic Plan, but consistent, sustained work remains to be done before we get there.***

## Student Achievement

1. Currently each middle and high school site decides whether to offer an honors track or not. Do you think that this model of decentralized decision-making works well to serve all students? Why or why not?

***It is disingenuous for district staff to maintain that either approach works equally well when there are very strong opinions on all sides of the honors/differentiated curriculum debate and parents note***

**big differences between what is being taught across schools and programs. As the chair of the Board's Curriculum Committee in 2011, I tried to open this debate and elicit opinions from staff experts on the elements of a successful program for high-achievers, whether it was a separate honors track or an integrated, differentiated model. Though I believe it would be best (from a communications standpoint) for the district to ultimately come down on one side or another, I am not completely opposed to different schools managing the issue differently, as long as we have comprehensive and clear guidance from district curriculum experts on things like:**

- **Interpreting the most up-to-date research on serving high-achievers;**
- **Training teachers on successfully deliver a differentiated curriculum model and guidance for administrators on evaluating the success of a classroom operating on this model;**
- **Defining consistent, objective standards on how students are enrolled in/qualify for separate academic tracks, if offered.**
- **Communicating and maintaining consistently high expectations and appropriate standards-based instruction for all students, whether or not they are in honors tracks;**
- **Monitoring the achievement of all students, and making master schedules flexible enough to move students between honors and general education tracks as their needs dictate.**

2. What should the district's role be in addressing students' physical and mental health and well-being? You may focus on specific issue(s) if you choose.

***If students are hungry, obese, emotionally traumatized or troubled, they cannot learn at an optimal level. Though schools are not funded to address these needs, it is in our interest to try anyway, so that all of our students can achieve. Assuring that all students are physically and mentally healthy is a massive task, but I am particularly focused on two urgent initiatives that I believe will have an immediate effect on the well-being of all students: expanding school meal programs to be sure every student in SFUSD can eat a healthy breakfast and healthy lunch at school, regardless of ability to pay; and decreasing the number of LGBT students who skip or drop out of school, consider suicide or engage in risky behaviors. San Francisco is a haven for LGBT people, but district data on outcomes for LGBT students is very discouraging. We must do better.***

3. How should the district best prepare students for college and career?

***I support the district's implementation of the A-G graduation requirements, because I think they better prepare students for college and career than the old requirements. I believe the district should expand hands-on and experiential learning options for students, and continue partnerships with the business community to give students expanded internship opportunities. Finally, I support expanded engagement with the Business Roundtable, which works with SFUSD and City College to make sure San Francisco's youth are being trained for today's (and tomorrow's) job market.***

4. Do you think we are serving our Special Education students well? Why or why not?

***No. We are not serving our Special Education students well, but we are getting better. Four years ago, I promised to focus on special education, and I'm proud of the improvements that have been made. The district has replaced most of the staff in the department, commissioned a top-to-bottom review of the program by outside experts, and begun to implement recommended changes. Most importantly, students with disabilities who seek to be educated in the mainstream now have vastly expanded opportunities for inclusion. When my daughter entered Kindergarten in 2004, I was told she could only be fully-included at half the elementary schools in the district. Now, every school in SFUSD is an inclusive school. There is a lot left to be done, but finally the school district is paying attention and progress is happening; I hope that students in special education in SFUSD can eventually receive the services they need and deserve.***

5. In February, the Board of Education approved a plan to "skip" layoffs of low-seniority teachers in Superintendent Zone schools. After the resolution was challenged by the teachers' union and struck down by an administrative law judge, the Board declined to pursue the issue further and layoffs proceeded per the collective bargaining agreement. Do you agree with the outcome? Please explain how you arrived at your opinion.

***Though I agree that seniority-based layoffs are the most objective way to determine who should stay and who should go when budget deficits require staff reductions, I supported the Superintendent's recommendation in February out of the belief that going ahead with a seniority-based layoff at the 14 Superintendent's Zone schools at that particular moment could cause us to squander the significant investment represented by the SIG funding and other initiatives – investments that our achievement data indicate are paying off.***

***However, I believe now that we should have taken more time as a Board and a community to debate the step we were being asked to take –mainly because we may have been able to develop other ways of reaching the same or a similar result if we had taken the time to try to negotiate a proposal.***

***At the end of the day, the achievement data we are seeing in the Superintendent's Zone schools proves what teachers, parents, Board members and administrators have maintained all along: investing more money in schools actually increases student achievement! Perhaps, instead of imposing a provocative policy that has divided us, we should have worked together to realize the ultimate goal: retaining teachers at Superintendent's Zone schools, who have chosen to work at those schools and received additional support and resources to be successful in what can be a challenging environment.***

***Should I be re-elected this year, and should the Superintendent again propose skipping certain staffs regardless of seniority, I will approach the decision differently after the experience this year. For one thing, I will ask that the Superintendent first try to negotiate the terms of the proposal with UESF, and also that any skip proposal and supporting data receive a more comprehensive public discussion and vetting than was conducted this year. Ultimately, I'm glad that we were able to bring back almost everyone who received a layoff notice.***

6. Given the cuts to professional development and general District resources, how should SFUSD attract, retain and develop high quality educators, administrators and school support staff?  
***With our 2008 parcel tax, we are now able to offer a starting salary of \$50,000 to teachers, higher than Oakland and other neighboring districts but still not much in a high-cost city like San Francisco. Still, I understand from district leadership that San Francisco's commitment to equity and its strategic plan are powerful recruiting tools. The Board can help by continuing to articulate the message that San Francisco is a place committed to quality instruction, teacher retention and a world-class education for every student in our city.***
  
7. How should the district better support and engage parents? Be specific.  
***Parents want to be part of their children's education and yet many feel they are excluded from district decision-making. Better communication of district initiatives and data would go a long way to help parents feel that they are well-informed; the attention my blog has received indicates to me that the public's appetite for information about what is happening at the district level is strong. In addition, every administrator must be held accountable for engaging ELACs, SSCs, PTAs, and/or PTOs at their sites, including (at the very least) investing in translation of all school to home communications.***

## **Student Enrollment**

1. Do you think that the redesigned student assignment system is meeting its stated objectives? Why or why not?  
***I believe it is too soon to completely evaluate the success or failure of the new system. I do not think it has increased diversity yet, but I do think it is starting to improve the ability of families to attend the closest school to their homes if that is what they want. I think the Board must continue to closely monitor the weights of attendance area vs. other preferences, to make sure these weights are***

***accomplishing the redesigned system's goals of increasing diversity and providing equitable access to the range of opportunities offered to students. We also must continue to demand more progress towards meeting third goal of transparency at every stage of the process.***

2. Last June, the Board of Education passed a new middle school feeder pattern policy. Do you think its implementation is on track and headed in the right direction? What do you recommend the District do to ensure its success?

***The controversy over the new feeder plan in some quarters does not really arise from the enrollment policy so much as the fact that the range of opportunities offered to students are very different across middle schools. The middle school team has engaged in important work over the past year, including becoming much more collaborative as a professional learning community and conducting walkthroughs of every school to assess instructional practices and provide detailed feedback. Several best practices have emerged, notably the Step Up programs for incoming 6<sup>th</sup> graders. However, there are questions of vital importance to parents that have not been adequately addressed, including the honors issue discussed above. Generally, though I believe the middle school team is moving in the right direction, I concede that the district's work has not been well communicated and that many parents feel disconnected and disengaged from it.***

3. Should SFUSD have competitive entry schools, such as Lowell and School of the Arts? Why or why not?

***I'm not particularly troubled by the existence of Lowell and Ruth Asawa School of the Arts, though my reasons for supporting each school are very different. Ruth Asawa/SotA is about nurturing exceptional talent in the arts and allowing students to pursue in-depth study of their chosen artistic discipline while completing a high school curriculum—it is a credit to the school district. In addition, the Academy at SotA allows any student to have the experience of a SotA education without having to pass an audition. Lowell, on the other hand, would probably not be established as a competitive-entry high school today, but occupies an important place in the history and traditions of the school district and the City as a whole. So long as we remain focused on the fact that every student should graduate college-ready, and remember that every high school should aspire to academic excellence for all students, maintaining Lowell more or less as is remains acceptable to me.***

4. What should the District be doing to keep families in the City and in public schools?

***There are two main initiatives where the district should redouble its efforts in order to help keep families in the City and attending public schools: expanded and more nimble communications to help us better highlight the areas where we are doing well as well as what we are doing to address areas where we are less successful (Superintendent Carranza recently told the Board that a district our size should have at least one more and maybe even two more communications officers, and as a communications professional I agree with him); and improving the district's overall transparency – around the budget, around student assignment, and around important initiatives like building quality middle schools. The Superintendent is also experimenting with social media and recently began tweeting as @SFUSD\_Supe; if he sticks with it he will send a positive message about his accessibility and willingness to communicate with the public.***

## **Budget and Finance**

1. California's public schools continue to face severe funding cuts. How would you suggest SFUSD restructure or leverage existing resources to serve our students effectively? What do you think is the best approach to the budget process?

***One of the things I have suggested over the years is for us to adopt a "zero-based" budget process – every year the budget starts at zero, and funding is added according to district priorities. Zero-based budgeting forces deep conversations about priorities, and also requires "priorities" to be backed up with real resources. Currently, we fund departments and programs, and sometimes it isn't clear to what extent we are funding our core priorities. I also believe we need to re-examine the Weighted Student Formula; I support maintaining the formula but we should consider re-weighting it to be sure the current formula is as fair and effective as it should be – for example, some districts using a***

**WSF take into greater account the number of special education students at a particular school – our WSF only puts a token weight on special education.**

2. What should the district do to make SFUSD's budget more understandable and accessible to parents?  
***The Board has been clear in recent years that the district must do a better job communicating budget information to the public, but there is still a ways to go. Our budget document is very dense, and difficult to use to make comparisons with prior years. I would also prefer a budget document that better communicates what we spend on core activities: classroom teachers, central office administration, site administration, professional development, supplies, facilities, etc. Such a document would really help us communicate to the public where we are spending our money and help make the case that our funding is quite lean. I will continue to push for more transparency in our budget communications and expanded opportunities for parents and other stakeholders to understand our budget choices and weigh in on them earlier in the cycle.***
  
3. There are two state funding initiatives on the November 2012 ballot. If both initiatives fail, SFUSD will face mid-year cuts of \$24 million. What should our contingency plan be as a district and city should this happen?  
***If the initiatives fail, we will have very few options but to cut four to five more days from the second semester to address the mid-year cut. Though our tentative agreement with UESF has not yet been ratified by union members, I expect the contingency of additional furloughs (forced closure days) will remain part of the final agreement when it is finally signed.***
  
4. When we are able to fill back in the holes of the current cuts, what should our next funding priorities be?  
***It's time to invest in our student nutrition programs. My short-term priorities for improvements include implementing universal breakfast and adjusting school schedules so that children have recess before lunch (shown to encourage students to eat more at lunch, therefore improving their concentration and overall achievement when they return to class). Over the longer term, we need to invest in our facilities so that we can finally move to scratch cooking student meals, improving the quality and nutrition of food served at school. In the coming two years we will also need to make significant investments in implementing the Common Core State Standards, which educators believe will do a better job fostering students' critical thinking and problem-solving abilities.***

## **Role of the Board**

1. Who do you believe are the most important stakeholders to shape the direction of the school district? How would you engage those stakeholders to ensure they have a voice in the Board of Education decision-making process?  
***Parents, guardians and educators share an incentive to make our schools places where all children are encouraged and nurtured to reach their full potential. Parents and guardians are invested in rearing children to lead healthy, happy and productive lives; educators are professionals who want to do their jobs well in a supportive, stimulating and rewarding environment. Educators have a voice through their employee organizations, but it remains important for district leadership to make decisions collaboratively with the professionals they employ (soliciting teachers' input on curriculum development and teacher evaluation, for example). Though the district maintains various parent advisory committees and engages with an array of parent advocacy organizations, additional investments are needed in the district's communication infrastructure -- technology, translation/interpretation and trusted communicators like parent liaisons and community school coordinators-- to improve the public's engagement with and knowledge of district initiatives.***
  
2. What is the role of a School Board member versus the Superintendent?  
***School Board members hire and evaluate the Superintendent, set policy, approve the budget, and represent the community's concerns in fulfilling those functions. No Board member has individual power to dictate policy or other actions to the Superintendent or district staff – the Board's power is only collective. The Superintendent, by contrast, runs the day-to-day operations of the district,***

*supervises and evaluates district staff, implements Board policies, and recommends initiatives to realize goals articulated jointly by the Board and senior leadership of the district.*

3. What role should the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors have in the education of SF children and youth, if any?

*As high-profile elected officials, the Mayor and the Board of Supervisors play an important role in reflecting and communicating community input and concerns about the schools to Board members; they also help shape public opinion and engagement in the public schools. In addition, the City provides crucial financial support to schools – through the Children’s Fund, the Public Education Enrichment Fund, and more recently, the Rainy Day Fund. Though I am opposed to giving the Mayor or the Board of Supervisors veto power over any course of action recommended by our Superintendent, I believe it is in the school district’s political as well as practical interest to solicit and consider input from City officials regarding the impact of our policies and the outcomes generated by investments from the City budget or through partnerships with City agencies.*

What should the role of parents be in our school district?

*As I said above, parents are crucial stakeholders in helping us build quality schools for every child – not just because their children will benefit if all schools in San Francisco improve, but also because the district cannot improve schools without parent involvement and parent engagement. Still, input from all parents must be solicited and considered in district decision-making: it’s important to listen and respond to input from parents who are already engaged in addition to conducting outreach to parents who have valid opinions but don’t know how or when to make them heard. For example, parents can and should play a big role in helping the district understand how well policies are being communicated and implemented and how well initiatives are playing out on the ground. At the same time, parents are not experts in curriculum and instruction, so it’s important for the Board and district leadership to consult and carefully weigh the opinions of career educators along with those of parents when considering questions of program need, staff evaluations and academic standards.*

What are some of the pressing issues for parents/guardians educating children in San Francisco?

*In addition to wanting high-quality schools in every neighborhood, San Francisco parents/guardians are very concerned about: afterschool care, convenient, safe and efficient transportation to and from school, safe, inviting and caring school environments, summer learning and enrichment options and programs that support student well-being.*

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

*As a Commissioner, I have been steadfast in my support of parent engagement, communication, transparency and continuous improvement. These are values shared by most, if not all, members of the Parent Pac, and I respectfully ask for your support for my re-election. More detailed information on my positions on various issues is available on my web site: [www.rachelnorton.com](http://www.rachelnorton.com)*