

Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire 2014

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 June 27, 2014, to sfparentpac@gmail.com. The SF Parent Political Action Committee may contact you for an interview following its receipt of this questionnaire. The interview date will be announced early next week.

Candidate Information

Candidate Name: Lee Hsu

Email Address: LeeHsu@hotmail.com

Telephone: 415-295-5050

Mailing Address: PO Box 27649, San Francisco, CA 94127

Website: <http://leehsu.com>

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'm a grateful product of American public schools. I immigrated here as a child because my parents were poor and wanted a better life for me even if that meant leaving everything they knew, including all their family and their home. I'm now a parent myself with two kids in public school. Public schools gave me a chance to attend college, law school, and get a decent job. I have found joy in helping kids find their passions as a school volunteer. I love my parents for giving me the opportunity and want to help others. Parents should support me because I'm a parent who currently has kids in SFUSD. I would be the only board member with kids in elementary school. My youngest son asked me yesterday, "Is poop extra food that doesn't get digested?" He's clearly learning critical thinking in his public school. This is my life as a public school parent. I'd like to simplify the assignment process to make it easier for working parents. I'd like to deepen technology and arts integration with special programs at struggling schools, as I see that as a better way to promote diversity. Parents should support me because I have personal experience in these areas and will work hard to make things happen.

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

I'm a parent with two kids in an SFUSD elementary school. One is in a general pathway, and the other is in a foreign language pathway, so I've had experience with two schools within one. That means twice as many fundraisers and parent meetings! It's what the assignment system gave us, and we just rolled with it. We're happy with it because it turns out to be a good fit for each kid. I'm on our School Site Council and volunteer as an assistant coach for a school soccer team. I've also tutored with Reading Partners at a school in the Mission District that has a high percentage of English Learner students. I built an entire after-school program from the ground up at a Title I school, which will be useful experience for SFUSD programs like Afterschool for All.

3. What do you think about SFUSD's Strategic Plan? Do you think its implementation is on target?

I think it's fine. With "Strategic Plans" and the 15+ "Master Plans" that are part of the overall game plan, I suppose I see them as aspirations, whether in SF or in any other district. The actual implementation varies at the ground level depending on whether it's a top-performing school or a racially-isolated school.

Student Achievement

1. As SFUSD moves to eliminate tracking, what are you going to do to make sure that differentiation is effective? What should "honors" really mean?

I would prefer not to eliminate tracking. Rather, have more differentiation in ways that will help kids who are struggling while engaging kids who are under-challenged. I know that's easier to say in concept, but what's that mean in practice? I think we have to get creative. A program where honors kids work with struggling kids who are two grades lower (e.g., 5th graders tutoring 3rd graders who are struggling to read)? Learning to teach is a great skill, and if advanced students are helping kids who are two grades lower, there's less stigma than if they're helping same graders. Creation of an all-honors magnet at, say, Viz Valley Middle School to make it a place where families want to send their kids? If we're worried about stigmatizing non-honors kids within a school, then create an all-honors middle school like Lowell in a community that could use a lift.

2. How should SFUSD ensure that the Common Core Curriculum is implemented effectively, especially in terms of communicating with parents and supporting teachers?

This is a tough one. I think communication is key. My older son has had an okay time with it, but with online testing, the actual experience varies depending on the hardware that each school has. I just asked my son again what he thought, and he replied: "I didn't really like doing it on the computer, I prefer to do it on paper." If he feels that way as a kid who has learned computer programming in San Mateo (which I'm trying to arrange at his school in San Francisco), then imagine how kids who haven't taken programming classes might feel? I don't have to imagine because I know the answer. I think we have to give it a couple of years before we draw any conclusions. It shouldn't be a basis for evaluating teachers until we've worked through it for a few years. And, we should also be careful about relying on Common Core testing for the next two years of 8th graders who apply to high schools in San Francisco, right?

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

I think we're doing okay with what we've got in resources. A good general education and a love of learning are key foundations to me. I'd like to see deeper technology and arts integration and programming classes at earlier grades since a lot of the jobs of the future will involve computer skills and creativity. I'm a big fan of a general liberal education, but I also think that many kids just need to know they can get a job and be self-sufficient when they're finally done with school and ready for the workforce. I wouldn't mind seeing a little more vocation-specific education at the high school level, with special attention to technology, health care, and information management.

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

Yes, I do. The inclusion program at my kids' school works well, and I think Commissioner Norton has done a great job in improving the District's attention to the needs of Special Education students citywide. I'm proud of our city for working so hard on this issue. I think the key issue is to make sure there are enough teachers and paras to make things work for students.

Parent Engagement

1. What does effective partnership between SFUSD and parents look like to you? Give an example of where you have seen effective partnership with parents – or not. Be specific.

This is a good question, but feels like a bit of a trick question! ☺ Is it really supposed to be a “partnership”? As a public school parent, I feel like it’s a bit of a tango at times: SFUSD tells us they want us to do certain things, and parents wonder why they’re not doing it since they’re getting paid and parents are doing the paying, and then we come to an agreement in the middle on how to work together. Typically, most schools rely heavily on fundraising to supplement gaps that exist because of Prop 13-related underfunding of our schools. The most effective partnership in some cases is when SFUSD just lets parents identify their site needs and gives them support – for example, if a parent community wants to create a site-specific after-school program that serves all kids as a model for others to follow.

2. SFUSD says that it values parent engagement. However, SFUSD has a perpetual problem with not communicating with parents until decisions have already been made. What do you propose to do about this?

I can’t cover this in fewer than 151 words! In all seriousness, it’s one of the complaints I hear the most. In some instances, it’s perceived as intentional, as if there’s hope that a decision can be implemented quietly without resistance because nobody knows. I think it’s mostly one of the challenges of administering a large district with diverse constituencies and primary languages. I have two suggestions. First, use more mobile technology to communicate with parents who have smartphones and shore up outreach to parents who don’t. Second, assign one school board member to be the primary point person for each school. Not by region, but citywide, so that each board member is primary liaison for 18-19 schools of varying types and locations. This is just for first contact to help parents and need not detract from the responsibility of all board members to all schools.

Student Enrollment

1. Do you think that the redesigned student assignment system is meeting its states objectives? This week a proposal was made to switch the order of CTIP and neighborhood area tie-breakers for elementary school applications. Do you support this proposal? Why or why not? Is there a different way we should be addressing student assignment? If yes, how and why?

Yes. I support this proposal. I’ve been advocating for this outcome for over a year now and applaud Norton and Fewer for having the courage to respond to the data. There was a jump in racially concentrated schools and racially isolated schools. The current approach was not achieving the intended goals. SF folks will make sacrifices for the greater good, but if it’s not happening, then we should revisit. I would prefer to see more theme programs – languages, tech, and arts -- placed at struggling schools to incentivize diversity-enhancing choices rather than relying on the assignment process. Starr King, Alvarado, New Traditions, Fairmount, Rosa Parks, and many more are examples of how parents will choose diversity if you give them something they want. It’s worth noting that the popular citywide language-immersion and K-8 schools are still eligible for CTIP 1 preference under this modest change. I think we can work with the system we have and think about creative ways to strengthen programs in areas of concentrated poverty by placing programs that will draw in resources. How about an arts-immersion elementary school in the Mission that can draw on the Community Music Center as a local performance venue?

2. Are we serving our middle school students as well as we should be? Why or why not? Be specific.

I think things are on the way up, but it’s still not ideal. I think language-immersion students shouldn’t be denied an elective. I think we should bring back honors and/or GATE in some fashion. I think Algebra 1 should be available to eighth graders who are ready for it. I’d like to see better continuation of elementary school language pathways. I’d like to see more language options for kids who haven’t had previous elementary school language immersion. I think students who are taking music should be able to take another elective. I’d like class sizes to be a little smaller.

3. What should the District be doing to attract and keep all families in public schools?

Simplify the assignment system. I have separate friends who are opting for private school this coming year for new kinders, new 6th graders, and new high school freshmen because they were assigned schools that didn't work for them. Their three stories are reflective of many more. These families are notable because of how much they volunteer in the community and how much they wanted to stay in SFUSD. Also, for middle school, bring back honors or some kind of GATE program. Many families are committed to public school and happy to volunteer for underserved students and communities. But, if they feel like they are sacrificing their own kids' development, that's a tough thing to ask. More engaged parents = more funds, volunteer hours, and donations into the system, and we cannot afford to lose those resources to private schools or the suburbs especially when they don't want to leave.

Budget and Finance

1. With the new Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF), the district is required to create a Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP). Parent input is required. How do you propose to solicit and incorporate community feedback into SFUSD's budget development process in a way that is respectful, clear and collaborative?

I'd like to see meetings in each of the city's eleven districts, perhaps two different districts each month on a rotating basis, not just at 555 Franklin. It's really difficult to get to 555 Franklin when you're competing with symphony traffic during rush hour, especially for a family with two working parents and kids in school. The public transit to 555 Franklin isn't exactly easy either. This will probably make me unpopular with current school board members, but what's harder for seven will be easier for thousands. It doesn't have to be BOE members; it can be reps going to school sites during regular PTA meetings on a routine basis.

2. What should the district do to make SFUSD's budget more understandable and accessible to parents?

This isn't easy. I think more summary pages can help. Perhaps make them look a little more like financial statements that are required of nonprofits and corporations, which follow a fairly standard format. I've analyzed balance sheets, income statements, and cash flow statements for investment banks and hedge funds, and that kind of standardization makes it easier for people to know quickly where to find answers and get a sense. A top-level summary sheet is perhaps the most important thing for most parents.

3. For the 2014-2015 school year, SFUSD expects to have \$13.2 million more in revenue than its current obligations. Some areas under consideration for additional funding include: increased teacher and paraprofessional salaries; adding a 7th period to the school day in middle and high schools to accommodate electives, A-G, and other required courses; and adding teachers to reduce class size in elementary schools. The district has already proposed to put \$3.5 M back into schools by increasing the weighted student formula and also the MTSS (targeted assistance to schools with higher needs). Every 1% of salary increase given to UESF teachers costs about \$2.2 million. Adding a 7th period to the school days of middle and high schools would cost about \$13 million total (\$5M for middle and \$8M for high). Reducing class size in elementary schools would cost about \$6 million. What is your approach to balancing the budget, given that all the priorities everyone wants to fund can't be funded? Give specifics.

First, pay teachers and paras more. I'm a big fan of adding the 7th period for middle school, but we've got to take care of our teachers and paras first unless we want to lose them to other districts or to higher-paying jobs like the average BART employee.

Role of the Board

1. What is the role of a School Board member versus the Superintendent?

BOE Commissioner hires the Superintendent and sets policy. Superintendent executes policy and manages day-to-day operations. Both should work together.

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

They should have a significant role. A lot of the challenges for our students face exist before and after they leave campus, and that's especially where City Hall and 555 Franklin have to work together.

Is there anything else you would like us to know?

I joined SF Parent PAC as a lifetime member after meeting the Steering Committee. I thank you for all of your service and appreciate how hard you work on behalf of parents throughout San Francisco. When I think of how much easier it'd be if I just focused on my own kids and their school instead of the citywide school board, I think about the hard work that you do and what it means for SF. Most of my best work has come because I don't care about credit and would rather recognize others. The toughest part about "campaigning" for elected office as a parent of two young kids is that it takes a ton of time, and everyone wants me to focus on me instead of others. In my humble opinion, one of the best things that Parent PAC can do going forward is to help parents who want to serve.