



# 2022 BOARD OF EDUCATION QUESTIONNAIRE CANDIDATE RESPONSES

October 25, 2022

To the South Orange-Maplewood Community,

We are pleased to share with you the **2022 Board of Education Candidate Responses** to our SEPAC SOMA BOE Candidate Questionnaire. We thank all the candidates for taking the time to share their perspectives. The Special Education Parent Advisory Committee (SEPAC) is not a political organization, and it does not endorse candidates in any election. This presentation is intended solely to assist voters by presenting candidate views on issues related to special education. The views expressed herein are the candidates' own.

Each year, the Executive Board of SEPAC SOMA releases a BOE Candidate Questionnaire so the community can have a better understanding of the candidates' views and any experiences they may have related to special education. We know special education is something people often learn about on a need-to-know basis. However, we believe holding a seat on the BOE means one is serving every student, including those with disabilities. It is our intention to provide them with questions that can be considered thoughtfully and without having to be an 'expert' on the subject. The candidates were invited to provide written statements in the form of responses to four questions:

- 1. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) affects students with disabilities more than other students in our district, at times to the point that it is necessary the student moves to a safer environment, outside the district. If elected, you will be in a position to learn about HIB-related incidents and approve the monthly reports. What do you think the BOE can do to change the environment that perpetuates the emotional, physical and mental mistreatment of our most vulnerable students?**
- 2. Throughout the United States, there are racial disparities when it comes to special education services, visible in the racial composition of special education classrooms from preschool through high school, and our district is no different. How will you, as a board member, address these inequities?**
- 3. As you've campaigned these last couple of months, what have you learned about special education in our district that has impacted you and how will you serve on the BOE?**

**4. We recognize the wide array of experiences people have who run for the board and appreciate this fact. We invite you to share a personal or professional experience that highlights how your actions promoted inclusivity.**

The following responses are in alphabetical order by candidate last name. Responses are presented as received with only minor edits to keep formatting consistent. We encourage you to reach out to individual candidates with any questions regarding their responses, and we encourage you to share this presentation with community members who might have an interest in special education. Responses are also available on our [SEPAC SOMA website](#).

Please visit the website to learn more about special education in South Orange/Maplewood and to sign up to receive regular notices of SEPAC meetings and activities.

But most importantly, we encourage all eligible voters to get out and vote. [Early in-person voting](#) is available October 29 - November 6. **Election Day is Tuesday, November 8.** Polls will be open 6am-8pm.

**SEPAC SOMA Board, 2022-2023**

Beth Cosentino, President

Michelle Reback , Vice President of Policy Initiatives

Lindsey Stone, Vice President of Community Outreach

Nicole Josey, Vice President of Equity and Inclusion

Ann Leeb, Vice President of Family Support

Kelly Mortimer, Communications Officer

Malia Herman, Ex-Officio

JUMP TO:

[Regina Eckert](#)

[William Gifford](#)

[William Meyer](#)

[Ritu Pancholy](#)

[Nubia Wilson](#)

## **REGINA ECKERT**

**1. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) affects students with disabilities more than other students in our district, at times to the point that it is necessary the student moves to a safer environment, outside the district. If elected, you will be in a position to learn about HIB-related incidents and approve the monthly reports. What do you think the BOE can do to change the environment that perpetuates the emotional, physical and mental mistreatment of our most vulnerable students?**

Bullying can have severe, long-lasting, negative consequences on any student. It can be especially harmful to students with disabilities since HIB may often keep a child with a disability from receiving a free and appropriate education (“FAPE”).

After speaking with SEPAC leaders, committee members and parents of children with special needs, the idea of character education being introduced into teacher professional development training, curriculum and instruction came up quite often. Our curriculum needs to reflect talking about our differences and celebrating uniqueness, we need to remove the stigma attached to being a special education student. Parents also suggested creating more socialization opportunities for our special education students, especially for those in the self-contained classrooms. Something Like a recess program where we put together a buddy system for a general education student and a special education student would be a great opportunity not only for socialization but to help build an inclusive environment.

I believe we can make great strides in creating a safe environment for our most vulnerable students by infusing character education with a well thought out social and emotional learning program from Pre-K to grade 12, specifically on conflict resolution and restorative practices. I’m encouraged that all of our individual schools have committed to SEL but we need to standardize our approach by developing a district wide, cohesive plan with measurable results. If we combine this with restorative practices, it can yield great results to improving the climate and culture in our schools.

**2. Throughout the United States, there are racial disparities when it comes to special education services, visible in the racial composition of special education classrooms from preschool through high school, and our district is no different. How will you, as a board member, address these inequities?**

During this campaign period, I’ve learned about “significant disproportionality,” a term used to describe the widespread trend of students of certain racial and ethnic groups being identified for special education, placed in more restrictive educational settings, and disciplined at markedly higher rates than their peers. I’ve also learned that in recent years, other research has shown that black and Hispanic students are actually less likely to be placed in special education than white peers who have similar academic and behavioral backgrounds. That could potentially leave them at risk of not getting the help they may need to succeed. During one of our campaign events, I met two separate parents who took me through their journey of getting an evaluation for their children in our District - one was White and one was Black - and it was extremely disappointing to hear about the stark differences in their experiences.

The White family said their experience was fairly easy, that they were able to move forward with their evaluation process with no issues. While the Black family described their experience as painful and arduous and they had to fight tooth and nail to even get an evaluation, after initially being denied three times. Research shows that it takes longer to classify minority students than White students and we need to do a better job in our screening process so they can get the help they need earlier. 16% of our students are classified as Special Education, but this number could potentially be higher as there are many students in the District who have not been appropriately evaluated and more students being denied eligibility altogether despite clear evidence of need. Unfortunately we have seen that we are a litigious District specifically within the Special Ed Department. Many parents have sued the District because their children are not getting the services required by law and given the current shortage in Special Ed teachers at our elementary schools, now more than ever we need to hold the Administration accountable in serving our most vulnerable students.

I fully support my running mate Nubia's position on increased anti-bias training but would take it a step further as research shows that stand-alone anti-bias training may not change long-term behavior. I think we need to look at this holistically and think about integrating training in a comprehensive diversity plan that involves teachers and staff in reviewing practices and structures that can promote bias. In talking to some teachers in our District, it's clear they are not involved in the decision making process and in my opinion, they absolutely should be. Research shows that a more engaged staff is a more productive staff and we need to take these specific measures to improve the overall climate and culture of our schools.

**3. As you've campaigned these last couple of months, what have you learned about special education in our district that has impacted you and how will you serve on the BOE?**

Over the past two months, I've met SEPAC leaders and committee members and parents of children with special needs - it is just heart wrenching to hear some of their stories. It's obvious that this community is underserved in a variety of ways.

A common theme I've heard is that going through the evaluation process in our District is extremely difficult. It's overwhelming and parents don't get much guidance (other than talking to other families who have gone through the process) and all of a sudden you are handed a big stack of papers that you need to complete. I met a parent in this District who recently went through the evaluation process and while her child's outcome is considered "good" in comparison to other cases, it really makes me feel for parents facing harder challenges. It's often very isolating and even though SEPAC has done an amazing job of bringing families together and advocating for our Special Ed students, the District needs to do a better job of bringing more awareness to this community.

I'm encouraged by the Special Education Committee that was just recently formed by the Board of Education and if elected, that is one of the committees I'd be interested in serving on so we can start to bring more awareness, support and results to this community. I'd also explore bringing back a SEPAC/BOE Liaison and giving SEPAC representation to speak for a few minutes at each Committee meeting. The last thing I want to mention is my concern that we've

had 7 Assistant Superintendents of Special Services in the past 8 years. With all the instability, it's impossible to build upon the foundation and operations of this department. As a Board member, I would ensure that the needs of our Special Education students are considered in every policy we review and that they are made a priority when setting District goals and I would hold the Superintendent accountable for measurable outcomes.

**4. We recognize the wide array of experiences people have who run for the board and appreciate this fact. We invite you to share a personal or professional experience that highlights how your actions promoted inclusivity.**

In 2016, I joined an education-tech startup whose mission is to give every child the opportunity to discover their love of learning. I was the 6th employee and immediately felt the impact of having a voice, a seat at the table. As the company grew, it became apparent to me that we struggled with the new employees in how to keep them engaged and involved. When I was tasked with building out the People & Culture function, one of my first priorities was to build the framework of an inclusive culture. Yes, that included hiring and retaining a diverse cross-section of employees but that was really only a piece of it. I took a holistic approach to create a culture that truly embraced unique ideas, perspectives, experiences and people. One of the first things I did was put together a task force where each department had one representative from their team and ensured that it wasn't just at the management level. We started the company's first employee resource group for working parents, developed a rotation of presenters at each weekly company meeting from each department and held lunch and learns where we brought entrepreneurs in to talk about their journey in the startup world, just to name a few.

To this day, I have former employees reach out to thank me for giving them a voice, for making them feel valued and for giving them a sense of belonging and uniqueness, and there's no better feeling knowing what I accomplished.

I appreciate that this question recognizes that all candidates come from different backgrounds and while this story isn't necessarily related to Special Education, I believe it shows a commitment to building this type of inclusive culture at the Board level with the goal of it trickling down to the Administration, our teachers and staff, our community and and of course, ALL of our students.

## **WILLIAM GIFFORD**

**1. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) affects students with disabilities more than other students in our district, at times to the point that it is necessary the student moves to a safer environment, outside the district. If elected, you will be in a position to learn about HIB-related incidents and approve the monthly reports. What do you think the BOE can do to change the environment that perpetuates the emotional, physical and mental mistreatment of our most vulnerable students?**

As a special education student myself, there's no question there is a stigma attached to being one. When I was at MMS and Columbia, for example, all the special education students were assigned a pull-out resource room. I can remember being regularly pestered for being in that class. It is never acceptable for students to be bullied, and it is especially horrific when it is a special education student. We must do everything possible to make a safe environment for our special education students.

I believe that the best way to stop this is by having a robust and consistent social and emotional learning program for all Pre-K through 12 students. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional (CASEL) states that "social and emotional learning (SEL) is integral to education and human development. The SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions." Combined with Restorative Practices, research has shown that a school's climate and culture can greatly improve while, at the same student behavior improves. I am happy to hear that the district has committed to SEL in this year's district goals, and I will do everything in my power to ensure we implement it properly and provide the resources needed to make it successful.

I also believe that our HIB process needs to be examined, and we need to make sure we are correctly following the law. It is also important that we provide counseling to the victims. Far too often, we provide counseling to the bullies but don't support those who had to endure the bullying. That must change.

**2. Throughout the United States, there are racial disparities when it comes to special education services, visible in the racial composition of special education classrooms from preschool through high school, and our district is no different. How will you, as a board member, address these inequities?**

Many tend to forget that special education was included in the Black Parents Workshop Lawsuit and settlement. We must ensure that we are doing everything possible to comply with the settlement and do everything in our power to ensure that we are. We will also ensure that we follow what we are required to by law. Far too often, many parents have to sue the district to get the services required by law, which must stop. I also believe that we must make sure that any data collected includes special education students so that we understand exactly where our students are. Right now, we are not doing that and it must change.

The research also consistently has shown that minority students are identified with disabilities at higher rates than white students based on classification rates across racial groups. The research also shows that it takes longer to classify minority students than white students, and

we know that early intervention is very helpful and leads to many students no longer needing Special Education services. I believe we must do a better job in our screening process, especially for younger minority students, so that we can get them the help they need earlier, which will help them succeed later in life. We also need to ensure our students receive the services they deserve and are entitled to by law. Right now, some of our elementary schools do not have the special education staff needed, so the students who can benefit most by getting their required interventions are not getting them. We will do everything possible to attract and retain special education staff and have even gone so far as to use our campaign videos to advertise for positions.

**3. As you've campaigned these last couple of months, what have you learned about special education in our district that has impacted you and how will you serve on the BOE?**

The main problem I hear from parents is that after an IEP is issued, the District struggles to deliver required services. Some students are lucky and subsequently assigned case managers that are life changing advocates while many simply do not receive the same quality service. The Board must ensure the administration has sufficient resources at their disposal to deliver services that are consistent across the district. It's not fair that some students are fortunate to get adequate services while others fall by the waist side.

The first thing the Board can do is increase funding for the Special Services Department. This will allow the department to focus on retaining and recruiting the best teachers to serve our special education students. Beyond that, as a district we need to focus on nurturing a pipeline of educators from surrounding universities such as Rutgers and Montclair. We can start this immediately by building out a robust dual credit program that could have college students providing additional classroom instruction, serving as mentors and advisors.

**4. We recognize the wide array of experiences people have who run for the board and appreciate this fact. We invite you to share a personal or professional experience that highlights how your actions promoted inclusivity.**

No other candidate running for BOE has had the unique experience that I have had. I was a special education student in this district. To be honest, it was a mixed experience. In my elementary years at Tuscan I had a pull-out class that provided individualized instruction focusing on reading comprehension. This class changed my life. Books that once intimidated me became windows to another world. I would not be the avid reader I am today without this kind of specialized instruction.

Nonetheless, things abruptly changed in Middle School. Suddenly I was placed into a pull-out resource room with class sizes ranging from 3-6 students. These classes were almost always tucked away into the basement, sometimes in rooms with no windows. This persisted into Columbia High School where the stigma of being a special education student really set in. There is no shortage of memories being bothered by fellow students for going to resource room. Worse was the fact I felt that resource room was a prison; it seemed the school just clumped this group of students, with a range of needs, into one small, confined space.

Today, I advocate for literacy as a cofounder of the Maroon Project, an activist incubator, based in Newark, NJ that creates spaces for students, organizers, and residents to impact issues of social justice through political education, civic engagement, and leadership development. A

cornerstone of the group is our Books and Breakfast program. This program which continues today is designed to empower youth and their families through education and literacy. By providing free books and a healthy breakfast, we aim to nourish both the body and minds of our next generation.

Many times, at these events I meet children and their parents who are struggling to come to terms with their classification as a special education students. I always share my journey, as well as my mother's, who fought tirelessly to make sure both her sons received the attention we needed. My brother Geoffrey, who is dyslexic, is a real success story for example. After struggling to read well into high school, Geoff graduated college in 3 years and now serves as a special education instructor and academic coordinator at The Titus School in Manhattan.

It's so important to share our struggles as special education students, to help others realize they're not alone.

## **WILLIAM MEYER**

**1. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) affects students with disabilities more than other students in our district, at times to the point that it is necessary the student moves to a safer environment, outside the district. If elected, you will be in a position to learn about HIB-related incidents and approve the monthly reports. What do you think the BOE can do to change the environment that perpetuates the emotional, physical and mental mistreatment of our most vulnerable students?**

Bullying of students with disabilities is a long-standing issue, closely intertwined with pervasive issues of stigma surrounding disabilities and receipt of special education. The disclosure at the October 20th board meeting of the stratospheric increase in recorded HIB incidents during the 21-22 school year makes this concern all the more urgent.

The specter of increased bullying often stands in the way of parents and students seeking or accepting special services in the first place. Many families will accept inadequate supports in silence rather than acknowledge the need for special education or accommodations, for fear of being looked at differently or targeted as a result. As someone who once had an IEP myself, I am only too aware of that concern.

There are many circumstances when a child should pursue an out of district program, such as when their learning needs are so uncommon or severe that they cannot be accommodated within the district, or as recourse for the district's failure to put necessary services in place within the legal guidelines. But no child should be forced to leave our school district to avoid harassment, intimidation, and bullying.

Our district's HIB policy (5512) sets out consequences for this behavior, in conjunction with our code of conduct. The district's response, whether through restorative justice procedures or traditional punitive measures, must be sufficient to repair the relationship between those students and dissuade any additional incidents.

This can only happen if these instances of bullying are adequately recognized and reported by schools, and if formal procedures are followed in these cases. When bullying incidents are portrayed as harmless and not put through this HIB process, these issues only continue. Teachers and administrators must be encouraged to formally report these incidents so that they are tracked and appropriately addressed. The goal of an HIB investigation is not to unduly punish the actor but to ensure that appropriate protections are put in place for the victim, with the ideal outcome being that both children are able to participate fully in school in safety and belonging.

Just as important as this formal process of addressing incidents after they happen is empowering fellow students to be part of creating a positive culture that discourages bullying and encourages being an upstander. Bystander intervention training for students has already been recommended by the BOE in Resolution 4149 in relation to sexual harassment and assault – students should be supported in learning how to appropriately be an upstander in relation to instances of HIB as well.

In the longer-term, we should also re-examine our approach to equity and inclusion for disabled students to reduce the “otherness” of disability, which feeds into the disparate rate of HIB incidents.

For instance, our district’s Policy 2466 prohibits many references to special services and students with disabilities, in order to protect those students’ privacy. It is widely known that most classes with two teachers are inclusion classes that provide more supports to disabled students, but this policy doesn’t allow schools to acknowledge that fact. Additionally, students who receive certain therapeutic supports in the middle school and high school are often encouraged to receive those supports covertly to avoid stigma.

These are well intended rules and may be necessary right now. But we must commit to educating all students in neurodiversity, acknowledging the wide range of strengths and weaknesses we all have, and better learning to accept each other’s differences. Hand-in-hand with that is the knowledge that many accommodations our special needs students require are helpful for all students. We should look at ways to universalize some of these in-class accommodations and tools to further reduce the stigma attached to them.

Ritu and I recently sat down with a group of community members at JESPY House to discuss the challenges facing our district. One member shared her experience with a school that facilitated peer social mentoring relationships between very social students and classmates with special needs in order to help integrate them into social circles. Proactive approaches like this can help ward off harassment by better integrating all students socially.

**2. Throughout the United States, there are racial disparities when it comes to special education services, visible in the racial composition of special education classrooms from preschool through high school, and our district is no different. How will you, as a board member, address these inequities?**

The most commonly identified racial disparity in special education is the trend of students of color being moved into more restrictive placements, typically as a result of having interpreted their classroom behavior and regulation as being more problematic than that of their white peers. These disparities in some cases rise to the level of unequal treatment under the law, and violate those students’ right to an education in the Least Restrictive Environment.

At the same time, newer research also indicates an underidentification of students of color, children from lower income families, and immigrant children for specific learning disabilities such as Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, and Dyscalculia, as compared with white and wealthier students. Different access to resources such as expensive private evaluations and attorneys contribute to this disparity.

The Board should regularly be given a report and statistical analysis of students in our district’s special education continuum of placement broken out by race and socio-economic status. This would inform the degree to which these disparities currently exist within our programs, and

guide the district as to students who should be especially considered for a more inclusive setting during their next IEP meeting.

It bears remembering, in assessing the problem and developing a solution, that students with disabilities are all entitled to individualized programs. The district may not unilaterally change the programs of a group of students, even to address a perceived racial imbalance. Reconsidering the program for any one child must be done with a close focus on that student's specific needs.

Addressing these disparities hinges largely on the use of regular and rigorous anti-bias training for our teachers and staff, especially members of our child study team, and equalizing access to evaluations. We should also be aware of the possibility of inherent biases present in some standardized assessments, and the possibility of biases introduced by the tester in these assessments. Use of culturally attuned functional behavioral assessments may also be helpful in reducing overidentification of students of color with emotional and behavioral disabilities.

**3. As you've campaigned these last couple of months, what have you learned about special education in our district that has impacted you and how will you serve on the BOE?**

Having a background in special education law professionally, I have made a point for years to speak with as many families with special needs as possible about their experiences in our district. In that time, I've heard stories from numerous families who have received outstanding support from our child study teams and teachers, and who feel their children's needs are being very well addressed in our district. But the more common theme is of parents who have faced long struggles getting these services, and the difficulties their children have faced. Over the past three months of campaigning and speaking with hundreds of families in town, I've heard many similar stories.

Most notable first of all is the prevalence of these concerns. About 16% of students in our district – 1201 students, according to Assistant Superintendent of Special Services Susie Budine from last week's SEPAC meeting – have been found eligible for special education and provided an IEP, with another 79 students in the evaluation process right now. There are many more students who receive services and accommodations under 504 plan – 458 by Ms. Budine's count – and an untold additional number who receive "at-risk" interventions under the Intervention and Referral Services (I&RS) framework. In my experience, close to one in every two families in town have a story of receiving – or attempting to secure – support through our Department of Special Services at one point or another, and many of these stories are about their struggles within that process.

It is clear we have our work cut out for us in bolstering our special services, in both traditional special education and the lower tier supports we provide to students. A foundational concern is the revolving door we have seen at the top of our district administration. We have had far too much turnover in superintendents, and doubly so in Supervisors (now Assistant Superintendents) of Special Services, which has led to interrupted initiatives and insufficient time to develop and move plans forward. I hold Dr. Taylor and Ms. Budine in high regard, and

acknowledge neither of them have easy jobs. Our systemic problems have not been solved simply by changing leadership. I want our Board of Education to provide the necessary supervision, accountability, and support to steer our current administration to success, assisted by the crucial input and guidance provided by SEPAC.

The most urgent need to address is legal compliance in our IEPs and 504 plans. We currently have a staffing crisis that has led to numerous In-Class Support (a.k.a. Inclusion) classes not having a special education teacher, as well as students missing their pull-out/resource teacher supports. This must urgently be addressed. I strongly support the district looking at all options within its hiring process and within our bargaining agreement with SOMEA to offer compensation sufficient to induce teachers to come to our district. However, our struggle with compliance predates this current difficulty with hiring and retention, suggesting that our problems in providing special education are more systemic and are not just a result of national issues such as the teacher shortage.

I have heard from numerous families who have seen failures in provision of special education instruction, related service therapies, and paraprofessionals in years past. I have also learned that these compliance breaches are not being comprehensively reported up to the BOE. A top priority if I am elected will be to request detailed reports on compliance issues, including the issuance of compensatory education to families, and to track those by school, child study team, and case manager to identify bottlenecks in the process. We must also have a true cost-benefit analysis of our outsourcing model for paraprofessionals to determine whether this model is a net benefit for our district and our students, with an eye toward improving quality and consistency.

I also want to review and address the rate of denials of parent requests to evaluate their children for special education services, which has been a common theme in speaking with families. NJ law gives districts the right to decline a request to evaluate based on a cursory review of a child's file, which leaves tremendous discretion to the district. Parents are often left with no choice but to secure private evaluations at their own expense to document a child's struggles before they are considered by the district for services, a process which leaves behind parents who are unable to pay for such evaluations.

Our I&RS process is well positioned to support many families who have needs for services that may not rise to the level of eligibility for an IEP, but we know these services and the procedures surrounding them have not been evenly administered between our schools. The BOE recently updated Policy 2417 to require changes to how the I&RS program is run, but to date it does not appear the district has drafted the mandated regulations to enact these changes. Among these changes are procedures and safeguards to ensure that students who do require full special education are not unnecessarily kept in I&RS and precluded from receiving an evaluation by the CST. This has been a longstanding issue that I have also seen personally with families I've met with and must be addressed.

When a child's IEP is insufficient or out of compliance, or a child who should be provided an IEP is not, that incurs substantial legal liability for the district, and can lead to parents unilaterally placing a child out of district at our expense. I have spoken with numerous families in this

position. That private special education school tuition can easily be the equivalent of a full time teacher position in-district. We need to be investing this money on the front end instead, ensuring that we are in compliance with our procedural obligations and working to create programs that would support more of these children in-district. We currently have some amazing in-district programs and teachers supporting students with elevated needs, and those classrooms likely save our district millions every year. This is the model we need to replicate. It is an investment that makes sense for children, for families, and for our budget.

**4. We recognize the wide array of experiences people have who run for the board and appreciate this fact. We invite you to share a personal or professional experience that highlights how your actions promoted inclusivity.**

I am proud to have found a rewarding career advocating on behalf of students with disabilities for close to two decades. I have witnessed up close the stress and even trauma families have endured when their child struggles academically, behaviorally, and emotionally in an inappropriate school setting. And I have witnessed the tears of relief when that child is finally in a classroom where they are able to thrive.

But I have to admit, my work is frequently not about inclusivity, or at least not about traditional inclusion. By the time families come to me, they have often exhausted their attempts to find accommodations for their child among their mainstream peers. And remarkably, it is often a much easier process to remedy a child's educational setting by convincing a school district to pay for the cost of a specialized private school than it is to get that district to modify their own offerings to work for that child.

To be clear, I have worked with several innovative schools where mainstream students receive a rigorous education alongside disabled peers with a wide array of needs and individual accommodations, so I know this is possible, if adequate resources are invested. However in my experience it is a very hard fight for a family to compel a public school classroom to change in order to support one individual child's needs. The reason for this is that public school classrooms are run based upon established district policy and longstanding unofficial practices, and are not well prepared to innovate and adapt. Until those policies and practices change, it is nearly impossible for any one family to secure an inclusive setting for a child whose needs differ significantly from those of their peers.

This is something I would like to be part of changing for our district. I want our district to become a place of maximal inclusion for special education children, to the degree appropriate for that child's individual needs. That begins with improving how we identify special needs and how we deliver services, and supporting the development of new programs and models for inclusively supporting students with disabilities, especially by considering the models used by the private programs our out-of-district students attend.

This change will require addressing the culture of how special services are viewed in our district, and one way cultures start to change is through representation. I am a lawyer and a father who had an IEP myself when I was in school. This isn't something I speak about often, but I think it's

important in this context. I very much want our differently-abled students and their families to know that they are visible and represented among all of the great diversity in our community, including on our Board of Education.

## RITU PANCHOLY

**1. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) affects students with disabilities more than other students in our district, at times to the point that it is necessary the student moves to a safer environment, outside the district. If elected, you will be in a position to learn about HIB-related incidents and approve the monthly reports. What do you think the BOE can do to change the environment that perpetuates the emotional, physical and mental mistreatment of our most vulnerable students?**

I am concerned about the number of HIB incidents in our district. Anecdotal data suggests that victims of HIB incidents may be disproportionately students with disabilities, or members of other vulnerable groups in our school community. Studies demonstrate that students with disabilities are two or three times more likely to experience bullying than their non-disabled peers. We should collect accurate data about this situation so we understand the scope of the problem accurately.

When adults [“respond quickly and consistently to bullying behavior they send the message that it is not acceptable. Research shows this can stop bullying behavior over time.”](#) Therefore the response from adults in our schools, from the principals to the teachers to the support staff and everyone in between must be improved. Ultimately, we as a community need to build a bullying prevention strategy. The district can help by providing forums in which parents can be educated about what to do if their child is a victim or a perpetrator of bullying. Sometimes the same child is both. It's our job to show all our children a better way.

While the district has a Code of Conduct, I would like to work with the BOE to encourage the Superintendent to continue to educate students and families about the Conduct of Conduct and what behavior is impermissible on school grounds. It would be great if we started off the school year with a universal understanding of what the Code of Conduct is and what are our ground rules for respect in the schools.

I also believe the district should offer teachers and staff training on bullying prevention. For example, teachers and staff should receive training on how to speak about bullying, how to prevent bullying, and how students can report bullying if they witness it. I believe strongly in creating an upstander culture versus a bystander culture. In an upstander culture, if you see something happening that is not appropriate or that is harmful, you are taught to be an upstander, to report the incident and to take action. In order to create this culture, students have to be aware of their rights, and there needs to be a strong reporting culture where the students know who to turn to if their own safety is in danger, or if a peer's safety is in danger, or if they are having a conflict that they need help resolving.

I am the daughter of a mother with a physical disability (MS) and the sister of a neurodivergent individual, I know from personal experience that students with special needs may be perceived as weaker and are therefore more susceptible to bullying. We need to create a school culture where students with special needs are championed and not othered.

Finally, we know our students need socioemotional wellness support. Our current programs need to be supported and enhanced further. I am concerned that [there is a state proposal to eliminate funding for school based youth services programs \(SBYSP\) throughout the State of New Jersey](#). SBYSP provides essential mental health services and personalized prevention programs to youth directly in our schools on a daily basis. This allows for students with the least resources to receive the supports they need directly in the schools from staff members with whom they may already have relationships with. In our district we have seen the success of the HUB at Maplewood Middle and the LOFT at Columbia High School. Family Connections of Essex County does an excellent job of making the students WANT to come into their highly accessible and welcoming environments. As a community leader I have signed the petitions that are circulating, and contacted our local representatives in regard to this issue.

**2. Throughout the United States, there are racial disparities when it comes to special education services, visible in the racial composition of special education classrooms from preschool through high school, and our district is no different. How will you, as a board member, address these inequities?**

Numerous studies demonstrate that minority students are sometimes identified with disabilities at [higher rates than other students](#), but at the same time the issue is complex because when the data is disaggregated by socioeconomic status, research reveals that Black and Hispanic students are less likely than otherwise similar white students to receive the services they need such as speech and language impairment services. In fact, a recent study suggests that Black and Hispanic students are overrepresented in special education classes in predominantly white schools, but Black and Hispanic students were less likely to receive the services they need when the school is predominantly composed of minority students.

It's important for our district that we are aware of the complexity and intersectional nature of how bias impacts Black and Hispanic special needs students differently in different contexts. The more reliable and consistent we can make our own processes for identifying students in need and providing services to them, the more able we will be to track our accuracy and make sure that we are correcting for our biases. The Intentional Integration Initiative gives us an opportunity to create compliance processes that work throughout our district and ensure that every school is able to serve every student appropriately. We must be rigorous about creating objective compliance systems that help adults make consistent, accurate and unbiased decisions when classifying students.

We must continue to recognize the role that implicit bias and systemic racism play in the overclassification of Black and Hispanic students as students with special needs. Research demonstrates that students who are misclassified may be significantly harmed. Special education services are intensive and costly; it is important that the district ensure that students are appropriately placed in special education classes. Appropriately identifying students with special needs is a complex process, but as a BOE member I hope to work with my fellow BOE members to ensure that the Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent Special Services and Youth Services improve the evaluation process used to identify students for special education services. It will also be critical that the BOE work with the Superintendent to ensure that

appropriate funding is allocated for training, staffing, and assessments for special education students.

**3. As you've campaigned these last couple of months, what have you learned about special education in our district that has impacted you and how will you serve on the BOE?**

I grew up in South Jersey with a sister who was neurodivergent and placed in special education classes from kindergarten until middle school. At that time, the 80's, my sister's classification as a student who needed special services was not discussed in our community or in my friend circles in an open and transparent manner. My parents did the best they could, and thankfully my mother was a former teacher who knew how to advocate for my sister, but there was a degree of shame that was associated with her classification because in the 80's self contained special education classes were kept so separate from the general education classes that there was a real stigma associated with the classification and placement in a special education classroom.

As I have campaigned over the course of the last few months I have had the time to really listen to and grow from the fellow community members who have shared their stories with me about their own childrens' journeys and their needs. It is clear that we have made some progress as a society, but there is still work to do in our community and beyond. As a district we need to ensure that all of our students recognize that they belong in our public schools, including our neurodivergent and special needs students. Learning as a student with a disability should not be isolating and or shame-filled. Our neurodivergent and special needs students should not be othered and or marginalized because this can lead to increased bullying in our schools. Our approach to inclusivity must include our neurodivergent students and students with special needs. Our general education students must also learn about inclusivity in a manner that includes our neurodiversity and special needs. We do better together when we recognize that neurodiversity and disabilities are part of the framework of inclusivity.

So many families struggle with receiving the services they need in our district. If elected, as a BOE member I would like to work with my colleagues to ensure that we receive data from the Superintendent and the Assistant Superintendent Special Services and Youth Services to highlight the number of: (1) requests for special services per school, (2) the district's response to these requests; (3) the classroom size and racial composition of the special education and inclusive classrooms per school; and (4) open vacancies (teachers, paras, support services, etc.) in the special education and inclusive classrooms per school on a monthly basis. This data would allow us to understand what is happening in our classrooms, because we must do better. We can improve our communication to parents and our delivery of services, and I want to work to make sure that happens in the future.

**4. We recognize the wide array of experiences people have who run for the board and appreciate this fact. We invite you to share a personal or professional experience that highlights how your actions promoted inclusivity.**

Thank you for asking this question. I feel passionately that my professional and personal background demonstrates that I have been committed to building an inclusive environment for a long time. For example, as an attorney at the NYC Dep't of Education I was tasked with responding to an investigation filed by the U.S. Attorneys for the Dep't of Justice after a complaint was filed by families with students with disabilities. In particular the complaint alleged that NYC schools were antiquated and did not properly serve students with disabilities because the entryway ramps to enter the schools were not ADA compliant, water fountains were not set at the right height, and not all of the school's facilities were accessible for students with disabilities. That experience highlighted for me the real life difficulties students with disabilities faced in older NYC schools that were not equipped at the time for students with disabilities. I worked extremely hard as an attorney to resolve those concerns by working within the appropriate channels to ensure that we addressed these immediate concerns.

Now as the owner of a HR employment law consulting company, Culturupt, I am called upon frequently to train organizations on diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. In my trainings, I focus on bringing awareness of people that are marginalized in our society, including neurodivergent and special needs individuals. My work has led to many productive discussions in the workplace about what it means to build inclusive workplaces. I am also hired as an independent workplace investigator when an individual files a complaint of discrimination, sexual harassment, and or bullying in the workplace. Building an inclusive workplace means that we take allegations of discrimination, harassment, and bullying seriously, and we listen when complaints are filed.

In my spare time I volunteer in a number of ways to strive for an inclusive culture in our community. For example, today is Diwali the Celebration of Lights for Hindus, Jains, Buddhists and Sikhs. It is a special day for our community. For the past several years my husband and I have volunteered with other South Asian parents in our schools to bring awareness to students of the multicultural richness of our community. I have also served as the President of SOMA Action, an organization that has contributed thousands of hours to building an inclusive culture in our community. SOMA Action members have spoken up against racist hate crimes and anti-Semitism, members have organized events with relevant speakers on these topics, and we have rallied to defend the fundamental human rights we all share. Building an inclusive culture is not just something I talk about aspirationally, it is my life's work and what I strive for in the community in which I live. If I am elected to the Board of Education, I will bring the same commitment to inclusivity to that work, because that is who I am.

## **NUBIA WILSON**

**1. Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) affects students with disabilities more than other students in our district, at times to the point that it is necessary the student moves to a safer environment, outside the district. If elected, you will be in a position to learn about HIB-related incidents and approve the monthly reports. What do you think the BOE can do to change the environment that perpetuates the emotional, physical and mental mistreatment of our most vulnerable students?**

Bullying is such an unfortunate aspect of going to school, and I believe we could do more to acknowledge and educate students (and parents) on neurodiversity. Through my PR agency, I had the pleasure of representing Black children's book authors, a husband-wife team, who wrote about an autistic child superhero inspired by their autistic son, Trey. I learned so much about the challenges Trey went through being bullied by students and misunderstood by teachers in NYC schools before he was properly diagnosed, which was late. A big takeaway: neurodiverse students need friends and being able to develop bonds with gen ed students breaks down bias.

During a SEPAC Cup Chats, parents asked for Character education through assemblies, books, and special guests. The U.S. Department of Education defines character education as "a learning process that enables students and adults in a school community to understand, care about and act on core ethical values such as respect, justice, civic virtue and citizenship, and responsibility for self and others ([source](#))." Character education ties in nicely with the social emotional learning/restorative justice program development goal that the District has for the 2022-23 school year. It also has synergy with the Culture & Climate action plans for K-12 that Dr. Gilbert is administering through the principals based on student/parent/faculty survey feedback from [the NJ SCI project](#). If I am on the board, I will advocate for Character education, as well as commit to requesting quarterly check-ins with Dr. Gilbert on how the Culture & Climate action plans are progressing in schools

**2. Throughout the United States, there are racial disparities when it comes to special education services, visible in the racial composition of special education classrooms from preschool through high school, and our district is no different. How will you, as a board member, address these inequities?**

There have been numerous studies that show the disability diagnosis rates among Blacks and Hispanic children are lower than white children in similar situations. [Education Next](#) examined this to be a fact over a 10-year period in Florida when they researched racial disparities in disability rates among children. This impacts parents' ability to access government-funded intervention services for their child. For example, if your child is not diagnosed with autism by the age of three, you miss out on impactful free services that support the child's early development. Blacks are historically diagnosed with autism at a later age (typically age 5) than white children ([source](#)).

What will help is having gen ed teachers and special education teachers who are aware that our community is not immune to these racial disparities through anti-bias training. Unfortunately,

research has shown that bias can cause a Black child to be considered “misbehaving” before getting the benefit of a doubt that they could be on the spectrum. Autism aside, addressing inequities starts with setting a precedence from the top down that there needs to be a commitment to looking at the whole child and evaluating them for all potential barriers that could prevent academic success. From there, we need to retain professionals in the field who are ingrained in our integrated, diverse culture through training and community interactions. Outsourcing paraprofessionals relinquishes a lot of the District’s control, and, after speaking with parents, I have heard some temporary paraprofessionals have not mirrored our community’s overall values. I would advocate for more thorough vetting before being assigned and ongoing oversight once in the classroom of these outsourced teachers.

Through our conversations with teachers I have learned that our anti-bias training in this district could be improved—it is not consistent and could be a more robust process with reputable programs like the [National SEED Project](#). As of September 30, 2022, the District announced [voluntary SEED Seminars](#), open to any and all faculty, but participation is capped to 25. There could be a financial reason why, but if I were a board member I would advocate to ensure that each and every faculty member is getting the very best anti-bias training and resources throughout the year. I would also investigate if there is specific anti-bias training suitable for the special education world to assist with the challenges I described above.

**3. As you’ve campaigned these last couple of months, what have you learned about special education in our district that has impacted you and how will you serve on the BOE?**

I have learned about special education and neurodiversity through my public relations client and South Orange/Maplewood friends with special needs children who moved to other towns because they weren’t being served well here. During the campaign trail, I have learned even more by speaking 1:1 to SEPAC leaders, parents at events and by attending a SEPAC Cup Chats. What I have learned is that our Assistant Superintendent of Special Services and Youth Services spends most of the time in litigation with parents who are fighting for their children’s plans to be carried out properly. If the District were able to better manage IEPs and 504s for students, this could be avoided. I am worried because at the start of the school year more than 50% of the teacher openings were in the special education department. I hope that the exit interviews of these teachers shed light on their decisions that will enable the District to better retain and attract the professionals needed to maintain a thriving special education department.

I also want to state that I completely understand that in certain circumstances some special needs children are better off outside of the district at other schools because of their needs. During a SEPAC Cup Chats, these additional concerns from parents were discussed:

- Transportation - students are not being dropped off door-to-door and some buses are extremely late.
- Inclusion classes - not all gen ed parents fully understand what these are and they see it is a negative instead of a positive. The District can better communicate that these classes enable students to interact with neurodiverse students (a good thing) and there is an additional teacher that each student gets access to, no matter who has the IEP or 504.

- BOE liaison for SEPAC - there is no longer a BOE liaison and parents see the value in having a SEPAC representative consistently in touch with the Board. Parents want to know why this was stopped and if a liaison can be reinstated.

I shared this feedback with my running mates Regina and Bill, and if we are brought on, we will advocate for issues like the above to be taken seriously, so that they are resolved for our families.

**4. We recognize the wide array of experiences people have who run for the board and appreciate this fact. We invite you to share a personal or professional experience that highlights how your actions promoted inclusivity.**

At the end of 2020, I launched my TV/film production company with two partners called Starfury Productions, founded to develop/package/pitch projects written by underrepresented content creators. A year later, I was approached by a young Black man based in Atlanta who had just graduated from high school and was an aspiring screenwriter in a local film school—he asked to be our virtual intern. Let’s call him Thomas. Through emails, I noticed that Thomas’ writing was weak for a high school grad (I would say an elementary school level), but I agreed to an interview anyway. Thomas was so bright, full of creative ideas, and eager to learn the film business. He had written many scripts on his own. He was constantly turned down as an intern by many production companies in Georgia, and he needed someone to let him get a foot in the door. My team and I unanimously agreed to bring him on. I shared grammar lessons with him and would correct his written work via tracked changes with notes so he understood the grammar rules (he read scripts and wrote coverage, aka script summaries, for us, so a lot of writing). I am not sure if Thomas had a learning disability, he said he was never diagnosed with one, but he acknowledged that he always struggled with literacy when I dug a bit more. After a few months, I had a long talk with Thomas and advised that he should take some reading and writing classes, and that I would sponsor him if he couldn’t afford it. He insisted that he would pay for it on his own. He did in fact sign up for the one I suggested. Fast forward and he is doing well! He got a background role in an indie film this year and he is still taking the grammar classes off and on, while working part-time. I am so proud of him and I hope to be able to hire him for a future Starfury project.