

Bill Gifford 10/14/22

1. Do you believe the district's current access and equity policy goes far enough in addressing systemic racism, issues of inequity, and needs of vulnerable student populations, i.e., POC, queer, special education students, immigrant, second-language learners, etc.? Yes or No.

Please clarify your answer.

No, I do not believe we as a District have gone far enough. This is a big part of the reason I ran for the Board of Education twice as a Columbia High School Senior and again as a College Freshmen. During my years at Columbia, if one walked into the cafeteria they might have thought the school was segregated with Black students sitting on one side and whites on another. The real segregation, however, was taking place in our classrooms as result of a rigid tracking system. When I requested the demographic breakup of levels at Columbia High School in 2004, the data revealed that Black students made up 90% of the lowest level classes across all grades and subjects. This was in a school that had 50% Black student enrollment. Today, we are not only continuing to fail our Black students, we are losing them with Columbia currently having around 30% Black student enrollment. The sad reality is that not much has changed since I ran in 2004. We still have two separate high schools & that must change.

The persistent reality of the achievement gap for these students has taken a heavy toll on this District. The failure to focus on fixing the gap during the elementary years with trackable, measurable internal programs perpetuates the problem. Research shows that when students fall behind on proficiency in elementary and middle school, it is difficult to catch up in high school for college and career readiness. We need to drive greater accountability for student outcomes and ensure that the District is collecting and analyzing data to drive decision-making. It is critical for evaluations and interventions to begin at the elementary and middle school levels through research-backed, forward-thinking programs. We also need to make sure that the District is in compliance with the BPW settlement agreement and if we are not we must make sure we do everything we can to get into compliance and hold those accountable that failed to follow the settlement terms that the district agreed to.

We are also failing our special education students. 25.5% of our budget goes to special education costs, yet we are constantly hearing from parents struggling to get the support we need for some of our most vulnerable students. No parent should need to resort to suing the district to get resources that students are entitled to by law, but this has become a reality for many. We must hold the district accountable and work towards making sure the resources are available to help students succeed.

2. Does the current SOMSD Intentional Integration Initiative do enough to address systemic racism experienced by Black students in schools? Yes or No. If applicable, please clarify your answer with your own ideas about how continuing racial disparities may be addressed beyond current plans.

No, the current plan does not do enough to address the systemic racism students experience on any given day in our schools. Making the schools more equal in terms of demographics is a good first step, but we have lot more work to do. Just because the school is more integrated doesn't mean that students

are receiving the same education. As I know from my time in Columbia, there were two separate CHS's and students have a much different experience if they are students of color.

As I stated in my first answer, we have tons of data to show a widening gap, and we need to start addressing that gap in the elementary schools. By the time students get to high school, they are already behind, and it is harder for them to catch up. Also, as a District we cannot say we are in favor of integration if we are not providing the resources we need it to make the initiative succeed. My team and I greatly favor additional busing to support the plan, but it cannot be done just through subscription busing. Subscription busing comes with built in inequities and it should only be used as an option for parents who don't meet either the 1 mile or 1.5 mile cut off that the Board of School Estimates is proposing.

3. Realistic active shooter and lockdown drills are used nationwide with little to no evidence of efficacy in a real emergency. During the COVID-19 pandemic, our schools had to replace physical reenactments of active shooter drills with tabletop exercises (in which teachers explain and review emergency protocols in a lesson or game). Are you open to keeping this approach and implementing it as research-based district policy for school security drills (within the state law)? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

Yes, realistic active shooting drills are traumatic for students and should be avoided. Thanks to the hard work of groups like these, NJ state law has changed recently to address the potential harm caused by these lockdown drills. It now aligns much more with our current policy, and I am happy to see these changes. The School District must follow state law and the memorandum of agreement with the school district, so I will support our administration in its efforts to follow the laws and policies we currently have in place.

4. In the aftermath of school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, we've seen the school district hire security guards in every school building, but not hire the same number of social workers to support the school climate, safety, and socio-emotional wellbeing of students (though we appreciate that more social workers have been hired). This is especially concerning in regards to recent fights and the tragic suicide of a student. Do you think that it is important for our school policies related to safety to depend on evidence and research rather than kneejerk and reactionary trends (for example, in some South Jersey school districts, K-9 dog units and armed police officers now patrol school hallways despite community concerns)? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

Yes, I believe that we must address both the mental health and emotional well-being of our students along with the safety and security of our students. Students cannot learn if they do not feel physically safe in our schools. Our own BOE student reps spoke numerous times last year about the fact that they did not feel safe at CHS due to almost daily fights and intruders in the building. The administration has taken some commonsense steps like requiring IDs for students to wear but we still have a long way to go. I do not support armed guards in our schools but do believe in the need for some security personnel in our buildings.

This year the district made developing a comprehensive social and emotional program for all students a district goal, and I was happy to see them take that step. When implemented consistently and continually SEL has been shown to not only increase students' mental and physical well-being but also their academic performance. I will work to ensure that we provide the district with the resources they need to have a robust SEL program.

We also need more social workers and mental health professionals available to our students and will work to ensure our budget includes more money for staff and mental help resources.

5. Do you support the placement of School Resource Officers (police officers assigned to and stationed) in SOMSD schools? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

No. While some districts may need an officer in extreme cases, I do not believe in having armed officers in our schools. Usually, the presence of these types of personnel mean that Black students are targeted first, which is why I generally do not like the idea of having them present. Instead, we should focus on the relationship between the police departments in town and the district.

6. For School Year 2021-2022, the SOMSD Board of Education implemented a one-year moratorium on school suspensions/removals except in extreme cases. Do you think that this moratorium should be extended as part of the effort to address the racially disproportionate discipline of students in regards to suspensions and expulsions? Yes or

No. Please clarify your answer.

It's difficult to answer this question simply with a yes or no. I've spoken to many teachers who agree in the spirit of the moratorium, but do not see it being properly implemented by the administration. As we know, the moratorium is currently being extended. The only difference between this year's and last year's policy is that Dr. Gilbert is now in charge of deciding if a kid should be suspended instead of Dr. Taylor.

I have concerns about the moratorium in its current form. The data shows that there was not much of a difference in terms of suspensions from previous years. I also have concerns about the fact that the task force did not include teachers, and that the students went on record to say that they barely participated in the discussions, and their concerns were not addressed in the final report. We need to do all we can to make sure we are enforcing discipline in an equitable manner.

7. During election season, BOE candidates make themselves accessible to the public through forums, meet and greets, outreach at local events, and debates. But after the election, these venues disappear. Do you have a plan for substantively communicating with parents and community members if you are elected, especially in regards to parents concerned about equity and inclusion? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

Yes, I believe in having BOE meetings that go to residents. There is no reason that we cannot have meetings at different schools around the district and we should also do a lot more community forum events where we focus on the pressing issues the district is facing. I am also in favor of making almost all of the committee meetings open to the public and allowing them the ability to comment during those meetings. The real work gets done in those committee meetings and there is no reason that we cannot open them up for the public to participate and view just like other towns do. I would also propose the District adopting participatory budgeting. We should be engaging constituents as we make decisions, not after.

8. Given that the current BOE seems to be moving forward with eliminating swimming and pool safety as a part of the high school curriculum, do you think that the district should work to ensure access to swim education for all students in the district, especially those who do not have access to pools or lessons outside of school? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

Yes, I believe the District needs to partner with both Townships to ensure our students have access to our municipal swimming pools. All our town's families and their children should not only have access to our pools, but affordable swimming instruction. The World Health Organization reports that drowning is one of the top 5 causes of death for people aged 1–14 years. Our emphasis should be on teaching children how to swim at an early age.

9. There will be occasions in which the BOE makes mistakes in planning. Are you willing to revisit and reconsider decisions of past BOE boards in meeting unforeseen community needs (for example, this year community members raised concerns about transportation and the permanent destruction of the CHS swimming program)? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

Yes. I believe there will always be times when we need to go back and revisit decisions made by previous Boards. For example, when I was at Columbia High School the Board eliminated our Vo-Tech classes Woodworking and Auto Shop. We need to explore bringing back a 21st century Vo-Tech. The burgeoning renewable industry is estimated to create millions of jobs many of which will be in construction and manufacturing. This green economy requires electricians, construction managers, photovoltaic installers and turbine technicians. Students can begin preparation for these professions with Vocational Training in

High School. There's no reason the District shouldn't think big and take advantage of Federal and State grants to build out these programs for our students.

With that said, SOMSD has some enormous problems in front of us that need to be dealt with right now. We must use our time and energy efficiently and should be prudent when revisiting past decisions.