

Kaitlin Wittleder

1. Do you believe the district's access and equity policy introduced in 2020 goes far enough in addressing the issues of inequity in our district (particularly in regards to vulnerable populations, i.e., POC, queer, special needs, immigrant, second-language learners, etc)? Yes or No
Please clarify your answer.

No. The introduction of the access and equity policy has been the first step in addressing issues of inequity in our district for some time now. SOMSD has had a history of inequitable behavior which has negatively impacted our most vulnerable populations for years and is continuing to do so now. As we strive for more equitable outcomes, the focus must lie on remedying what our District has done and creating a platform and strategies around what we're going to do going forward. The BOE and School Administration must take a steadfast approach to address these challenges head on so that our most vulnerable children no longer fall victim to an inequitable education system.

2. This current integration plan relies heavily on professional development, but research shows that this is not an effective way to reduce bias. Do you have other specific ideas about what other forms of data the district could collect or actions it could implement to address the educational disparities in regards to Black students? Yes or No Please clarify your answer (in addressing both segregation and the racial achievement gap)

Yes - Equity is synonymous with education and the foundation of an equitable education begins as early as pre-K. Empowering students with knowledge is an action we can take today to disrupt systemic patterns of racial inequity in our district. I believe that SOMSD has started to do the work to quantify data around the achievement gap of our Black students. Dr. Edward Fergus, an applied researcher at Temple University, was tasked with exploring the effects of our educational policy in SOMSD. His research around math competencies pointed out that our District suffers from curricula misalignment which exacerbates patterns of disparity and ultimately defines who will have access to Advanced Placement math courses in high school. Unfortunately, our District shows a pattern whereby race/ethnicity plays a major role in advanced course placement resulting in fewer Black students participating in advanced level courses.

An OCR Report filed for SOMSD showed that on state tests in math and language arts, Black students lagged behind their White classmates in all seven elementary schools. State test scores are identified as student achievement data and are generally considered a lagging indicator, what are the leading indicators, or process-oriented indicators of performance, that are resulting in lower test scores for Black students? Leading indicator data will expose the achievement gaps and will empower our education leaders to make more strategic and less reactive decisions about services and supports to improve student learning.

Collecting and analyzing leading indicators would require accurate and complete demographic data, instructional process data and perception data. Below I've included a few leading indicators that would help us address systemic challenges of racial equity and educational access:

- Overage/under-credited students - how many students fall into this category? Why? How do we prevent more students from following the same path? Are we continuing to support these students? Do they have guidance counselors?*
- Early reading proficiency - STAR Renaissance has been adopted by the District to provide more transparency around reading proficiency levels but I would like to understand how we are making decisions based on what we're learning*
- Special Education Enrollment - why and how are Black students being classified as special needs disproportionately to White students? What is the experience of a student with special needs in our District?*
- Student Engagement*
- Teacher and Principal Quality*

Additionally, I believe that we should be collecting and reporting information around how many students complete their Advanced Placement courses at CHS. The initial enrollment number should not be presented as a leading indicator for equitable access for Black students. This number does not account for students who may drop these courses during the early part of the school year. Accuracy is key in addressing the educational disparities in our District.

3. Realistic active shooter and lock down drills are used nationwide with little to no evidence of efficacy in a real emergency. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, our schools have 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) even after kids are vaccinated against COVID-19? Yes or No

Please clarify your answer.

Yes. I believe that active shooter drills are disruptive, traumatic and can have negative effects on our children. I want to also acknowledge that these drills take a major toll on children with special needs who can be negatively stimulated by loud sounds and dramatic changes in routine. I do acknowledge that active shooter drills are required by NJ State Law 18A:41-1 which states that every school shall have at least one fire drill and one school security drill each month.

4. Do you think that the current policies in place for the SOMSD adequately address the racially disproportionate discipline of students in regards to suspensions and expulsions, and the disproportionate number of students of color placed in special education? Yes or No

Please clarify your answer.

No. Black students face a disproportionate number of in-school and out-of-school suspensions which leads to fewer days spent in the classroom learning. I believe that SOMSD should focus on creating a culture where teachers and administrators lead and act with more SEL (Social Emotional Learning). Research studies have proven that suspensions are counterproductive in handling situations of misbehavior and that a better way to address students is to first and foremost acknowledge their emotional needs and empower them to identify and manage their own feelings. SEL can decrease high rates of suspension, expulsion, class disruptions and chronic absenteeism.

Roughly 15% of our student body is special needs and close to 50% of this population are Black students. Black students being disproportionately classified as special needs in our district. SOMSD adopted a new suspension (5600) policy in 2019 which infers that the district enact the following, "early detection and prevention program to identify students in preschool through grade two who are experiencing behavioral or disciplinary problems and provide behavioral supports for these students which may include, but not be limited to, remediation of problem behaviors, positive reinforcements, supportive interventions, and referral services." I think this policy is looking to institute more SEL practices into how we engage with students but the data tells us that we may not be fully in accordance with this policy.

5. Do you think that there should be more accountability in ensuring that educators in our district do not discriminate against students of color in the classroom in regards to instruction, advising, curriculum, or discipline? Yes or No

Please clarify your answer.

Yes. Racial bias training is not 100% effective in dismantling biases. Knowledge alone does not lead to change because biases can be invisible to the untrained eye. I think it's important to help staff apply their learnings and to receive real-time feedback around their classroom interactions. This way a teacher could have the opportunity to identify potential areas for improvement and introduce non-biased behaviors.

Additionally, I believe it's important for teachers to expand their depth of cross cultural competencies to understand what our books represent about various groups. Exposing students to different people, perspectives and parts of the world will help develop student agency and voice.

6. Do you think the district should specifically address the social and educational disparities that result from the COVID crisis for those students who don't have access to resources at home? Yes or No.

Please clarify your answer. (If possible, be sure to specifically include mention of students with special needs in your response)

Yes. I think we need to reimagine extended learning opportunities beyond summer school programming in an effort to truly support students with different levels of reality. Race, ethnicity and socioeconomic means play a role in what a summer at home looks like for every child. Those children who might benefit the most from summer school may be those children who, beyond circumstances they can control, are unable to participate. While we have students in our school buildings, we need to take advantage of every opportunity to help them. I think our District would benefit from introducing a mentor or tutor program where students could receive support throughout the school year so that student needs are addressed right away.

7. 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. I do not believe in the excess policing of our schools. If we were able to thread SEL into the culture of SOMSD, I think that School Administrators would find School Resource Officers to be obsolete. I would love if our schools could have a School Community Aid, someone the children trusted and someone that prioritized the development of community and love in our District. This School Community Aid would exhibit social and emotional intelligence and would be able to recognize the social and emotional needs of our students and meet them where they are. I believe that having someone like this on staff would be much more constructive than a police presence and could better diffuse behavioral situations as they arise.

I would be remiss if I did not mention, that in the 2020-2021 school year, we lost a beloved community member Moussa Fofana to gun violence on school property at the Underhill Field Sports Complex. I support safe schools and for developing policies that ensure all of our students feel comfortable and secure while on school grounds. I believe that our SOMSD Administration and BOE could do more in addressing safety issues.

8. Given that swimming and pool access has been eliminated 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. Learning how to swim is a life saving skill and as a former swimmer, lifeguard and swim instructor, I believe every child should learn how to swim. Having access to a pool and proper swim instruction is very difficult for many families and I believe that there's an opportunity for the SOMSD to save lives through developing a swim education program and I would like to explore further if elected.

9. Do you think the district should work to provide equitable access to be in dialogue with our school district leaders to address parent concerns? Yes or No.

Please clarify your answer.

Yes. I think the District needs to move away from taking a one size fits all approach in how we communicate with our parents. I think that the District has a tendency to unfairly label the parents who aren't advocating for their children, showing up in Administration offices, or emailing with teachers, as parents who don't really care about their child's education, growth and development. I believe that it is a privilege in our society to be a super involved parent and that children should not suffer as result of the level at which your parent is able to engage in your schooling. I think we need to adopt equitable methods of communication which give parents choices that are convenient to them and which would afford each and every family, regardless of race, ethnicity or socioeconomic status, a platform to address their concerns and make the most informed decisions for their children.

10. For incumbents only: If you are an incumbent, please explain how you have worked to address race and inequality in SOMSD during your previous tenure.

Other:

- Please feel free to include a link to a video clip (posted to YouTube or Vimeo) in which you explain what personal/professional commitment and understanding of educational access, equity, and racial justice you bring to the role.