

Qawi Telesford

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.** While the district has a comprehensive policy on equity and has committed to providing equal and bias-free access to all students, there are still areas the district needs to address. Of concern is how the district serves children with special needs; in my research on the topic, the district has a rather thorough policy for classifying students, but I have not been able to find any data on the demographics of classified students. Knowing and reporting this information allows us to consider whether there is any bias in the system and will help guide future policy. This is also an important area to investigate because district placement should not be based on race or cater to those with greater financial means. Likewise, the district also needs to provide a vocational program for students with special needs; currently, most students go to Union county because such programs are not available in Essex counties. In addition, programming for students with special needs often starts later in the academic year than for the broader district. Programming usually begins in October, well over a month after the school year has begun, thus inadvertently forcing students with special needs to start their school year later.

Another area that needs more attention is the curricula designed for our school. While the Comprehensive Equity Plan states it is an ongoing matter, a multicultural curriculum has not been implemented fully. While the district has implemented the Amistad curriculum for K-12 in the 2021-2022 academic year, there is still a need for more integration. Given the recent spike in anti-Asian hate, a curriculum that integrates more contributions by the AAPI community is essential. Likewise, the district curricula needs to integrate more aspects of the LGBTQ+ experience into the social studies rubric.

In addition to enhancing the curriculum, hiring more teachers of color, especially Black teachers, will do a great deal to change the cultural diversity of the school. But more importantly, a cultural shift as a whole should be promoted to see the potential in all children so as to encourage them to pursue achievement. Open access to all classes is important to building a framework of equity, but investing in the potential of all children is essential to realizing that framework.

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.** Professional development can lead to reduced incidents of bias and should continue as part of the district's commitment to equity. However, the district must not rely on this structure exclusively to reduce bias; professional development only represents one piece of a multifaceted approach to addressing racial disparities. Other important additions include comprehensive support for students, family outreach, and a committed administration.

Across these areas, providing support to students must include identifying students that need additional instruction; in addition, students should be provided mentors, tutoring and peer support groups to help them succeed. Schools that have implemented such strategies use in-class tutors, create after-school homework centers, and organize faculty to meet weekly in grade-level teams to identify students who may need additional help [1]. The addition of such practices would further enhance the integration plan. In regards to data, the district currently reports demographic information for every class by gender, race, ethnicity and gender identity. To determine how well the district is doing with integration, demographic information needs to follow individual student trajectories to see if more students are taking higher level classes and if their course schedule follows a trajectory that leads to greater access.

The district has a promising vehicle through the Parenting Center. Currently, much of its programming features speakers and support groups related to students with special needs. This center provides a great resource to the community and should expand its mandate to include more programming focused on marginalized and low-income communities. Another way to further support the center is to have more programming featured in local neighborhoods. For instance, using the Hilton branch of the Maplewood library could provide parents access to programs that are close to home.

At the heart of any integration plan, the district needs to have administrative buy-in at all leadership levels, this includes the board, superintendent, and leadership (principals and department heads) at all schools. Wraparound services and more student support can only occur if integration is considered a priority at all levels.

[1] LaCour SE et al. (2017). Learning from schools that close opportunity gaps. Phi Delta Kappan, August 28, 2017.

3. Realistic active shooter and lockdown 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.** There are multiple reports on the deleterious effects of active shooter drills [1,2]. In a recent report, researchers found active shooter drills in schools correlated with an increase in anxiety, stress and depression among those in the school community, including students, teachers and parents [2]. These findings demonstrate the need to pursue alternatives that promote school safety. Use of tabletop exercises should continue as it allows for students and teachers to respond to, and recover from an emergency or security incident in a less-stressful environment [3]. Tabletop exercises can also be used to educate students on different emergencies that may arise in a school setting (e.g., natural disaster, fire, bomb threats, etc.).

[1] McAllister MJ et al. (2020). Active shooter training drill increases blood and salivary markers of stress. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2020 Jul 13;17(14):5042. doi: 10.3390/ijerph17145042.

[2] Report: The impact of active shooter drills in schools. Everytown Research & Policy, September 3, 2020.

[3] Shein M. (2021). The anatomy of a tabletop exercise. Security, August 2, 2021.

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.** The district's disciplinary policies are encouraging as they include a commitment to restorative justice, which utilizes dialogue to address behavior and repair relationships. A practice like this should reduce suspensions and expulsions. However, given that the restorative justice practices are meant to lessen draconian disciplinary practices, the district's reporting of suspensions and expulsions alone may not be adequate for determining racially disproportionate discipline of students. The data collected should include more demographic statistics on students and the frequency that they receive disciplinary and/or restorative justice practices. Pursuing this avenue will provide more information on whether there is racial bias in school discipline.

In addition to restorative justice practices, coaching of teachers is also essential for reducing bias. In a study on racial disparities in discipline, teachers that received individualized coaching that focused effectively interacting with any student, found a reduction in racial disparities in discipline even after their coaching concluded [1]. This study demonstrates that racial bias can be addressed even if not explicitly addressed in coaching.

With regards to special education placement, the district should report statistics on the classified students and their placement inside and outside the district. In my research of the topic, I have not found this data, which would help us understand if there is racial bias in student placement and would be essential for advising on future policy.

[1] Gregory A et al. (2016). Closing the racial discipline gap in classrooms by changing teacher practice. *School Psych Rev.* 2016 Jun;45(2):171-191. doi: 10.17105/SPR45-2.171-191.

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.** Part of ensuring accountability is by collecting demographic data and assessments that follow student course schedules and record disciplinary interactions. In many cases statistics collected are often a snapshot that offers a point in time. While a snapshot is useful, more longitudinal data is needed to get a clearer picture of student trajectories in the school system. Students need to be tracked year over year; having an accounting in these areas can uncover bias and allow for adjustment to curricula and policies.

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.** The district should take the initiative to ensure that students have adequate access to resources at home. The district took an important step in providing Chromebooks to all students. While Altice and Comcast provide free Internet access, it is only for 60 days; there should be a follow-up program that provides students with limited Internet access mobile hotspots for the duration of the school year. For special needs students, high priority should be focused on continued in-person instruction.

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.** When considering the placement of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools, it is important to consider the reason why this course of action was considered. After the massacre at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, the US Secret Service and Department of Education released a report on Threat Assessment in Schools [1]. In their report they advocated the creation of a multidisciplinary threat assessment team that includes faculty and administration, a school resource officer, mental health professional, and other staff, such as guidance counselors. However, the important question to ask is, “Do we want police officers in school to fight crime or provide safety for students?” If we look at the data, a school resource officer (SRO) in school does result in lower crime rates [2]. However, crime is not a problem in our school system, there is not a prevailing issue of needing to lessen “crime” in our school system. The focus should be on school safety, but the placement of SROs in schools has not proven beneficial.

The presence of SROs are also associated with increases in exclusionary discipline [3], and the use of exclusionary discipline appears to affect students of color more, thus compounding issues of racial bias in education [4]. Considering the district’s policies geared toward restorative justice, the inclusion of SROs runs counter to this goal. A police officer’s primary role is law enforcement; student safety encompasses more than enforcing the law. Students can be kept safe with other practices. For instance, tighter control of entrances and exits that students and the public can use, the introduction of more counselors and early intervention, and the use of School-wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SPBIS). The district would be better served implementing a tiered support system to address student behavior. Students should feel safe in their school and this outcome is not best achieved with police officers patrolling the hallways.

[1] Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and to creating safe school climates. United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education, July 2004.

[2] James N and McCallion G. (2013). School resource officers: Law enforcement officers in schools. Congressional Research Service.

[3] Gottfredson DC et al. (2020). Effects of school resource officers on school crime and responses to school crime. National Institute of Justice, 255104.

[4] Kupchik A and Ward G. (2014). Race, poverty, and exclusionary school security: An empirical analysis of U.S. elementary, middle, and high schools. Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 12(4), 332–354. doi: 10.1177/1541204013503890.

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.** While the high school once offered swim education, swimming and water safety education need to be taught at an earlier age. With regards to the district, a program that provides free swim lessons to all students is essential to providing adequate and equitable access to swimming. According to the CDC, drowning is 2.5 times higher for African Americans aged 5 to 19 compared to white children and teens of the same age [1]; it is even higher in a pool setting with African Americans children and teens drowning at a rate 5.5 times higher than white children and teens [2]. More broadly, drowning is the second most common unintentional injury-related death for children 14 [1]. Accordingly, all children in the district should receive free swim lessons at the local pools in the summer.

If we take the district's estimated size of 7200 students (based on the 2018-2019 enrollment summary), educating every child in an 8-week program with two lessons a week would cost the district \$4 million. With an operating budget of \$140 million, this represents just under 3% of the budget. More realistically, students should be offered lessons once at the elementary, middle and high school level, which would be a fraction of the cost and would do a great deal to save lives.

[1] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Underlying Cause of Death, 1999-2019 Results. CDC Wonder. <http://wonder.cdc.gov/>. September 2021.

[2] Gilchrist J and Parker EM. (2014). Racial and ethnic disparities in fatal unintentional drowning among persons less than 30 years of age--United States, 1999-2010. *J Safety Res.* 2014 Sep; 50:139-42. doi: 10.1016/j.jsr.2014.06.001.

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.** The school district should provide more programming to increase interactions with parents and school district leaders. One way to facilitate access is to organize more events with the superintendent through the Parenting Center. Last year, the superintendent held town halls at Seth Boyden and Jefferson; the addition of more school-based events that involve the superintendent and assistant superintendent could be beneficial. For instance, an ice cream social or cupcake social held for parents at different schools can provide an open environment for parents and district leaders to interact.

- 10.F or 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.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agbQUfIkJO>