

## REGINA ECKERT - BOE CANDIDATE 2022

**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 it does not. The Access and Equity policy was really only the first step in addressing issues of inequity in our District; it simply removed the administrative barrier for entry into advanced level classes.

We believe there needs to be a higher level of accountability at the District level to show that the right supports have actually been built in K-12 to ensure student success at every level. We all saw the sobering data presented at the August 2022 BOE meeting: students of color at CHS continue to suffer. Across all cohorts, outcomes have declined – but the impact continues to be especially harmful to Black and Hispanic students. The current interventions don't seem to be working and it's evident that we're not paying enough attention at the K-5 level when we continually see the issues at the high school level persist. Logic will tell you that the gap increases as time goes on and I'm not seeing enough curricular attention given to the earliest years.

The policy also does not address how the District will support all vulnerable students. We should be thinking about providing programs which address different learning types and how we can better integrate and infuse the Amistad curriculum and AAPI studies in the classrooms. It's also important to consider how to support students with special needs and how character education can be introduced into teacher professional development and in the classrooms.

I believe we need a more comprehensive and updated policy in place that can help address the above. Our diverse community deserves diverse educational options.

**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 it does not, although we should recognize that breaking down systemic racism experienced by Black students in schools is not an easy task. While the Year 1 Intentional Integration data shows that we've made great strides in distributing some of the SES and racial imbalances that have existed for years, simply moving around kids to different schools is not enough to address this.

We need to be thinking about enhanced curriculum and policies that actually improve educational outcomes for all of our students, but especially our students of color in this context. If we want to make our schools welcoming places for people of color, we need to be focusing on hiring and retaining more faculty and administrators of color, research-backed training for teachers, affirming diverse Black histories and cultures and

treating Black faculty and students with respect.

**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. Active shooter drills are associated with increased cases of depression, stress and anxiety and physiological health problems. Our schools must be a place where students feel safe and ready to learn, but security drills that result in student trauma have the opposite effect.

I'm encouraged that the table top approach has been used by our District and that our new Director of Safety and Security is open to implementing this and more discussion based training, while abiding by state guidelines. He appears to be taking a thoughtful approach in balancing compliance and the social emotional needs of students and staff.

**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. The mental health and emotional well being of our students should be a top priority - always - but especially in light of recent events.

During the Safety & Security forum, Dr. Gilbert talked about Strong School Cultures and Climates to create safe learning environments for students and staff. I'm encouraged that we are using a data-driven approach through the NJ SCI program to help inform action plans at the Middle School and HS levels. Based on the results presented, there's still some work to be done for students and staff to feel safe in our schools and I look forward to seeing the plan around the social-emotional learning and restorative justice programs that align with the District's goals.

At the elementary level, I've seen first hand how The Elementary School Social Work Program can benefit the younger students in our District. My daughter took advantage of this program last year as she dealt with social anxieties of being back in larger group settings.

My husband and I were impressed with the responsiveness of our School Social Worker to get her into the program and the progress we saw over the course of the year as she learned how to manage her feelings.

Through our partnership with Family Connections, the District also provides School-based Support Programs at MMS (The Hub) and CHS (The Loft), which have been greatly received by students and their families. My running mate Nubia recently learned from a teacher that Gov. Murphy has proposed a statewide program that may lead to losing our funding to continue these programs in our school (the proposed program would support schools state wide). These School-Based programs are so important to keep in our schools as there are no financial barriers, no transportation barriers.

We need to ensure our students - at all levels - have access to the appropriate resources. Not only is the programming mentioned above important, but staff resources as well. It is very concerning to me that as of April 2022, there was only one full time social worker at CHS, especially given the large student body. In addition, the CHS Guidance Director position is still open. The former Guidance Director Falynn Blassone had been with the District for over 10 years, starting as a counselor and most recently overseeing many important functions: college admissions process, incidents of Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying (HIB) and out-of-district placements for special education students. She has some big shoes to fill but it is very refreshing and promising to see how involved the BOE student representatives have been in helping bring more awareness to the mental health resources available to our students, as well as collaborating with the guidance departments in the middle and elementary schools. While I am confident that they are continuing to do the good work, they will certainly need the support at the administrative level and hope that they can find a replacement that will carry on all the work she has done, and more.

**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. The presence of SROs in schools often negatively affect students of color and students with disabilities. The placement of SROs would also counter the District's goal toward SEL and Restorative Justice practices.

The focus should be on students and faculty feeling safe in our schools. There are other ways that students can be kept safe and I'm encouraged by the revamped security protocols at CHS put into place by the new Director of Safety and Security, Mr. Valles.

**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.**

No, not in its current state. I don't believe we gathered enough data to inform the decision

to extend the suspension moratorium. While I don't support removing students from the learning environment, we still don't know the root causes driving the behavior of kids who act out. If we want to enhance the culture and climate of our schools, we need to understand the driver of behavior and learning for each child. Even the BOE student representative asked the question last year - did the suspension moratorium make schools safer and how? I believe the processes put in place during the moratorium need to be improved before extending the moratorium. It was disappointing to hear that deadlines for reporting were missed, the culture and climate surveys were not administered in a timely fashion, teachers were not involved and even the two students on the task force felt there was little effort to broaden the voices of students involved to include Black students and those with special needs.

- 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 absolutely support a more accessible and communicative Board. A common theme in the responses from both the Community and Teacher Surveys is that our Board and District need to do a better job with communication. And as a community member, I agree. In the many times that I have emailed Board members multiple times throughout the past few years, I only found 1-2 members to be responsive. While I understand that Board members must receive multiple emails a day (in addition to what goes on in their work and personal lives), sometimes a simple response acknowledging that my question was received and someone would get back to me, would go a long way. Over the past few years, many community members have lost trust in our Board and District because of the lack of transparency and communication and if elected, I commit to changing that culture.

- 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.**

No. Learning how to swim is an essential skill to life, one that should be provided at early ages. Data shows that the largest amount of kid-related deaths from drowning happen in kids under 12. If the objective is to teach kids in our community how to swim, then we should be looking at the best options to do that - how it should be done and where. I'd like to see the townships further scale some of the recent efforts like offering more options for swim lessons to non-pool members (these were often held during work hours and that time is inconvenient for many) and offering free pool memberships to those who qualify (even with the pool funds, the cost still remains as a barrier to entry for many community members), perhaps during certain days/hours?

- 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 am always willing to come to the table with an open mind to revisit decisions of past BOE boards, especially when in consideration of unforeseen community needs. However, there should be a process in place in how the Board prioritizes their time and resources with current work vs. spending time revisiting past decisions and how it will impact shifting priorities.