

Nubia Wilson - Responses to SOMA Justice Questions

- 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, we are not doing enough. The current Access and Equity policy puts the onus on parents and students to empower themselves to make the appropriate decisions for advanced-level courses, and states that the District will provide age-appropriate academic support for access to these classes, but we need to go further. My running mates and I believe the policy lacks accountability from the District, as well as adequate direction for how the District will support all vulnerable students, not just students in the high school years related to AP classes. It is great that we have the Amistad and AAPI studies curriculum now and it must be integrated into classrooms properly by teachers.

For decades the district has been grappling with access and equity. For students of color, we need to further evaluate the emotional and social implications that affect their ability to thrive in a school environment with mostly white teachers who are not going to fully understand the lived experiences of a student of color. The same goes for special education students, immigrants, LGBTQ+, immigrant and second-language learners—there is no clear support in the policy. How are we evaluating the learning needs of these unique groups and the gaps in our District that need to be filled outside of advanced-level courses? We already know the district has a history of not following through on IEPs, which result in lawsuits. In addition, the District can especially do a much better job integrating the special needs population into the gen ed student body through character education in classrooms.

After speaking with teachers about our anti-bias training (which is mandatory), it has become clear that District training could be more structured with established, research-backed programs more often. For example, teachers are required to have 4 sessions of anti-bias training during professional development (PD) hours and sometimes that just entails principals giving them articles and talking points over a slideshow. One year there was a consulting firm based out of Houston that handled training. Another option is training on their own (in lieu of the district administered training) through the [National SEED Project](#) (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity), which has been around since 1987 and has a New Jersey branch. As of September 30, 2022, the District announced [voluntary SEED Seminars](#) this year, open to any and all faculty, but participation is capped to 25. The District must ensure that each and every faculty member is getting the very best anti-bias training and resources throughout the year—the program needs to be more robust.

- 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 address systemic racism enough. Based on the data we have, the current integration plan has created more balance between the schools from a socioeconomic and racial perspective. The District has not clearly communicated how the integration plan addresses systemic racism experienced by Blacks or any other student of color and I believe it is because they don't know how yet. Breaking down systemic racism requires more than just moving kids around schools. There must be adequate systems in place to evaluate, measure and then action solutions that will eradicate systemic racism based on feedback from parents/children on lived experiences in our District, research-backed training of teachers, anti-bias education for students, and further analysis of our curriculum within the bounds of what we can legally do as a school to ensure that students are receiving a diverse anti-racist curriculum.

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 we should keep this approach. As a childhood trauma survivor who lives with PTSD, I understand the challenges of managing triggers all day, every day, and it is something that children cannot easily do on their own without support. It would be foolish to think that our community is immune to violence, therefore, we need to be prepared if something unfortunate happens in our schools. I believe it is important to prepare students (and faculty) for potential emergency situations, so that if something were to happen and their brains go into "flight or fight" mode, they can rely on what they learned during training exercises. There have been a number of organizations researching the immediate and long-term impacts of active shooter and lockdown drills. The nonprofit Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund partnered with Georgia Tech conducted a study in 2020 and found that active shooter drills are associated with increases in depression (39%), stress and anxiety (42%), and physiological health problems (23%) overall ([source](#)).

I am happy the District made the switch to tabletop exercises and I am very supportive of teachers conducting research-based tabletop exercises ongoing, within state laws, in lieu of physical reenactments. I would also advocate for teachers to be re-trained on these exercises regularly to ensure they are delivering the information accurately and that they are able to also recognize if a child is being triggered from the tabletop training. Avoiding re-enacting emergency situations does not 100% prevent a child from being triggered while discussing it in class and reviewing protocols. The brain can be triggered in many ways—meaning a memory that brings a

flashback to a traumatic event in the brain could still be triggered during discussions. If faculty members are not trained to recognize distress signals from triggers, our District is not adequately modernizing how we support the mental well being of our children, no matter what the situation is in school.

- 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 school policies related to safety should depend on evidence and research. I have a background in journalism and also represent experts and thought leaders for my public relations clients in various verticals, which means I naturally lean towards constantly reading research studies to support the claims of my clients. When creating school policies and advocating for change, it cannot be based on personal biases or agendas of Board members or District leaders. The policies and goals should also reflect the specific needs of the community.

During the SOMSD Safety & Security Town Hall, it was communicated that the middle schools and the high school are creating action plans to build strong school culture and climates based on data collected through the NJ SCI project in partnership with Rutgers. They survey students, staff and caregivers/parents, and the principals and staff use the data to drive and move school culture and climate within the schools in an equitable manner. Elementary schools will also create plans. The surveys ask respondents to answer a range of questions using a rating system of 1 to 5—strongly disagree is 1 and strongly agree is 5. The [current NJ SCI data](#) shows that “negative student and interpersonal behaviors” is a major issue for middle and high schoolers (mean score for all schools is a 2.69 by 6-12th graders and 2.42 from parents/caregivers). Support for social and emotional learning had a total mean score of 2.58 for 6-12 students. As the school knows, there is work to be done and I am pleased that the District has a goal to develop a social emotional learning and restorative justice program to support students.

Armed police and security officers are not the answer. A nurturing, empowering environment with trained professionals to support mental health, interpersonal behaviors and safety are needed. Now that we know that Governor Murphy is defunding school-based youth programs to create the [centralized hub NJ4S](#), we need to be very intentional about how we plan to support our students amidst a mental health crisis and be forward thinking in how to fund programs that are potentially going to be eliminated, such as MMS The Hub and CHS The Loft.

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, we do not need School Resource or Police Officers (aka SPOs) in our schools, we need trained social workers. Should we protect our students against violence in schools? Yes. Do we need to reduce and mitigate violence among students to maintain a safe environment? Definitely, but that doesn't mean we have to do that with SPOs. SPOs expanded after the Columbine High School shooting and the federal government distributed millions to jurisdictions for the Community Oriented Policing Services in Schools Program (COPS), which resulted in hundreds of SPOs across the country. Although the federal government has decreased its resource allocation to SPO programs, some state and local governments have continued to support hiring them. Adding police officers versus more trained social workers is a "performative band aid" under the guise of reflecting a school that is "protecting its student body" when in reality, research shows it has been linked to more arrests for youthful behavior that is being unfairly criminalized. The rate of serious crimes in schools have drastically dropped since the 1990s when SPOs were deployed and research shows that SPOs spend most of their time investigating minor incidents and might do so very aggressively, as discussed in the book [*Homeroom Security: School Discipline in the Age of Fear* by Aaron Kupchik](#).

With that said, I am concerned that we just lost our Columbia High School Guidance Director Falyne Balassone who had been in the district for nearly 10 years and was at the high school for two and a half years. She was instrumental in a number of initiatives that supported social and emotional learning and safe spaces for students, and I hope her replacement is able to adequately carry on the torch, while bringing even more innovative ideas to the student body.

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. Unfortunately our moratorium doesn't properly address and rectify the issue, so let's first fix the moratorium by adjusting the process and creating a research-backed restorative justice program with the appropriate players necessary to make it run effectively, and then continue it on. [*The School Discipline Dilemma: A Comprehensive Review of Disparities and Alternative Approaches*](#) is research that links loss of instructional time in school from disciplinary actions to the expanding racial achievement. I think re-examining how we discipline students in school is necessary, especially when the research shows Black students especially are more likely to be disciplined/suspended in school than other races. I also think that it is dangerous to put a hold on suspensions without a well thought out plan to back it up. The moratorium was not transparent and failed to address the alternative means of discipline or restorative justice that took place and what the racial breakdown was. Also how

many students were not suspended who would have been otherwise? Was any training conducted for district staff to prepare for the moratorium?

How are these students being supported to prevent inappropriate behavior in the future? In order to address the racially disproportionate discipline of students, we need to do a lot more than just put a moratorium on school suspensions and removals—we need to create a support program for these students based on data and tried and true solutions in school communities that mirror ours (from a student body perspective). Solutions should include additional support for special education, mental health, tutoring, and teaching staff/faculty to ensure that a proactive approach is being taken when evaluating the needs of a student who has misbehaved or broken school rules. Principals need to be armed with the resources and District support to proactively craft solutions in collaboration with teachers and staff that establish a safe, nurturing space for these students.

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, anyone who holds political office should be dedicating themselves to staying connected to the community after election season; otherwise the board cannot maintain and cultivate trust and transparency. If I am elected, I will dedicate myself to staying connected to parents and community members. Bill, Regina and I have already demonstrated that commitment through our Community Survey and Teacher Survey, created to better understand the challenges and priorities of our community. In addition, within the ethics regulations set by the NJ School Boards Association, hosting more town halls, being accessible via social media platforms that our towns are very active on, connecting with neighborhood associations and meeting with local special interest groups are ways that I would like myself and the entire Board of Education to stay connected. I would also be open to public feedback on additional ways to do so.

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. If the District can help contribute to the process to make a solution become a reality without sacrificing staying focused on urgent matters like learning loss, curriculum and instruction and ongoing District goals, then that is great—but the onus should not be on the school District to make this happen. Drowning is the top cause of accidental deaths for kids under age 4,

according to [The National Drowning Prevention Alliance](#). Through my research, I have yet to find a New Jersey law that states learning to swim is mandated to be part of school curriculums. If we are going to be mindful of the data, which states the best time to learn to swim is when you are under 4, then let's be intentional about how we fix this problem for our children before the high school years. We are currently experiencing a budget dilemma in our District and restoring the pool is not part of the Long Range Facility Plan. As much as I personally would love to have a beautiful, modern pool at our high school, I fear that doing so now would create a financial crisis. Our two towns are run by amazing leaders who are collaborative, and perhaps one of the many local community groups could rise up and work with leadership to make change happen. Free pool memberships to families who qualify and a community-based Big Brother/Big Sister Swim program that pairs children with teens who know how to swim and could teach them for free on weekends or weekdays would be helpful solutions.

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, a Board of Education should always be forward thinking while reviewing past policies that already exist to ensure they are adequately meeting the most up-to-date needs of the community. If the community is experiencing hardships based on a Board's decision, the decision needs to be reconsidered.