

Will Meyer

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. Our equity policies are an important step in the right direction but they do not solve all of our existing issues. The intentional integration initiative is so far yielding increased diversity in each classroom through integration and that will lead to increased opportunities for equity in the classrooms. However creating a broader array of student races, income levels, and parent education levels does not in and of itself create equitable education.

Another important piece is the training given to teachers in those classrooms. Given the historic lopsided disparities in some of our schools, which are slated to now have a more representative ratio of students of color and those from lower income households, it is crucial that teachers are given practical training on cultural competency and implicit biases so that students are not subject to disparate treatment within a classroom and as compared between schools.

The resources available to the schools is also an ongoing issue. Especially during this interim integration, there is still a notable disparity in the resources of the PTAs. Once all our grades are part of the integration initiative placement model, that economic differential should be reduced, but it is still important to consider the degree to which schools have access to equal funding for augmented services like fundraiser costs, teacher grants, and student body activities, and look for opportunities to level that playing field.

Continued implementation and support for our inclusion curricula is also crucial. We must ensure full and ongoing implementation of the Armistad curriculum, the Holocaust curriculum, the AAPI curriculum and the LGBTQ curriculum. It is also imperative that we continue to adopt and incorporate social emotional learning within our curricula to address our student body's mental health concerns as well as to nurture a student body that welcomes and leverages differences.

We have much work to do to provide equity for our special education students. We have chronic systemic issues with access to evaluations and eligibility for special education services that need to be examined and changed. It is too difficult for students who are exhibiting special needs to get evaluated by the district and have services implemented. And unfortunately, even those students who do have an IEP for services often discover that the district is not implementing them because of our current teacher vacancy crisis.

We have also made changes in recent years to the way our special education classrooms are designed that negatively impact students. Our preschool integrated classrooms have fewer classroom paraprofessionals than before, which puts additional strain on teachers and staff and provides less support to our most at-risk young students. Our school age integration classrooms are often filled with not only students with IEPs but students in need of IEPs but for the difficulty securing that status, which undermines the general/special education ratio that is the underpinning of these classrooms.

We must work to resolve our teacher vacancies ASAP and conduct a thorough compliance review of the programs given to our existing special education student body, and in the longer

term conduct a broader review of our special services offerings and determine whether they could be revised to better address student needs.

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 intentional integration initiative is only at the beginning of its second year, so it is not possible yet to judge its full impact on our schools. However this initiative does not target several outstanding areas that lead to racial disparities in our school system. Of particular concern to me is the disparity in use of discipline and special education identification and placement to address teacher concerns regarding Black students, and we must do more to address the disparate outcomes for Black students at the high school. I believe the III will address some of these concerns in the long term, but more will be required.

As discussed above, a revisiting of our special education policies and programs is necessary to address issues of equity. Ensuring that Black students are not being overidentified for specialized placements and therefore removed from the mainstream population must be a part of that effort. The changes to the district's suspension policy, as discussed below, is also very important. The district's renewed focus on at-risk students at the high school level is critical to address the education debt owed to Black students at Columbia, and I support dedicating increased resources to those programs, including Cougar Academy, SLAM Lab, the trial of honors humanities cohorts for at-risk 9th graders, after school interventions, and district-provided tutoring services.

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 be meeting our state requirements and ensuring the appropriate preparedness for our school staff and law-enforcement without causing undue emotional impact on our children. The active shooter reenactments we have seen carried out in schools across our nation are shortsighted both from an efficacy perspective and in the emotional damage done to our children. In our current environment of increased social emotional stresses post-covid, we should do everything possible to protect our children from unnecessary re-enactments of violence. It is a terrible consequence of our current age that our children need to practice shelter-in-place preparedness, and we must do this in a manner that does not create its own trauma.

But the development of this policy must in fact be research based, not just at the whim of community members, including members of the board. We know all too well the unthinkable consequences of school shootings when they do happen and we hold a duty to the families we represent. We should ensure our law-enforcement has adequate access to our facilities to

appropriately train during non-school hours and facilitate drills involving teachers and staff with law-enforcement during those non-school hours as well.

Just as important is evaluating the security protocols in place at our schools, especially in rigorously controlling access to the school building and to student populations, to make certain we are adequately protecting our students without creating an atmosphere of fear.

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, clearly our safety policies should be developed in a research-based and holistic manner, not viewed solely through a punitive and law enforcement lens. I appreciated the district hosting a Safety and Security Forum this summer, in coordination with the introduction of our new Director of School and Community Safety. Ideally I would like to see a more holistic emphasis on how we integrate safety measures with our social-emotional supports. We should ensure that future events include a broader array of district stakeholders from the school system to address the implications of safety protocols on at-risk populations, including special education students, and coordinating guidance and counseling resources alongside threat assessment and mitigation. Step one of addressing fights and other disturbances in our buildings is to acknowledge the inextricable tie between these two domains.

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. Except for in very limited cases such as some weapon use and mass disturbances, addressing conduct at school should be the responsibility of school staff, not the police. Hand-in-hand with this, we must provide adequate professional development to district staff in crisis intervention and building security procedures, and provide clear and consistent guidance and training in protocols for when law enforcement should be called. Children feel safe, valued and respected when they have a real connection with at least one adult in their school, and we must commit to adequately resourcing our schools and adapting the school systems to make this a reality for all children.

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.

Yes. The district has made a determination to continue this limit on suspensions, and I support this move. We know that suspension use was being applied in a disparate manner by race, and that our prime directive as a school system is to educate, not exclude. However I do believe that our current policies do not sufficiently delineate when a suspension is appropriate and leaves too much discretion to the superintendent. I support developing bright line rules for types of conduct that may lead to suspensions under our current rules. Our suspension moratorium only makes sense if we also re-commit and reinforce training in restorative justice procedures. Restorative justice is a potent alternative to punitive measures to address school conduct, but it requires buy-in, training and practice from students and staff. At the foundation, we need a common understanding in our school community about what drives children's behavior. Before we can outline the punishments for behavior we must unpack all the causes of behavior and match that with appropriate corrective action.

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. It is crucially important that lines of communication stay open, while respecting the ethics guidelines on the actions of individual board members. We have seen several ethics complaints pending recently regarding allegations of individual board members attempting to work outside of the board process. I commit to routinely sitting down and hearing from members of our community on their thoughts and concerns, but while acknowledging that one member cannot speak for or act on behalf of the board, and keeping in mind that the concerns of our community at large are not always equally represented in those who seek an audience with board members.

I support convening periodic town halls outside of the standard board meeting process to provide open forums for discussion of pressing issues facing our district, including equity and inclusion, paired with public presentations of where we are in addressing these issues. Having a longer period for public speaks at those forums would be a kindness to parents who find participation in our board meetings burdensome late on a school night, and pairing them with prepared presentations can offer the possibility of addressing some issues in the moment.

I also strongly support the use of the Rutgers Climate Surveys that have been piloted in our high school and middle schools recently, surveying the concerns of parents, students, and teachers. This comprehensive query into community concerns is essential to hearing from families who may not otherwise be reaching out, though we should ensure the data from this survey is broken out into subgroups to better identify problem areas, and are leveraged to create solutions. I am hopeful we can soon roll these out to our elementary and pre-K programs as well.

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. Swim education implicates physical education and safety awareness, and is especially important as an equity measure considering the disparity in swim readiness among our students of color and in special-needs populations. I support the district coordinating with our town recreation departments to facilitate swim instruction being made available at minimal or no cost to all our students to support swim education and address safety concerns. As a practical example, consideration could be given to making town pools available on weekdays in the month of June and September for students to have access to swim instruction after school, in addition to instruction provided over the summer. Ongoing consideration should be given to the increased availability of indoor pools throughout the school year, including the possibility of collaboration with Seton Hall, or installing “enclosures” at the town pools for year round use.

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 think we need a careful balance between respecting the decisions of prior boards for the purpose of ensuring consistency and a steady trajectory forward, while acknowledging the fallacy of sunk costs and being prepared to pivot as indicated by circumstances and well-reasoned decision making. If the board has made a clearly shortsighted decision, or one that subsequent data shows is faulty, we should absolutely review those decisions and find a path forward that is in the public good. But we must do so cautiously, and always with an eye toward achieving our larger strategic goals, be it the capital improvement of our facilities to best meet our students’ pedagogical needs and ensuring that strong instruction continues into the future, or implementing our integration plan to further the urgent needs of equity.