

William Rodriguez

2021 SOMSD BOE Candidate
SoMa Justice / PARES Survey Response

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

Re: District Policy 5755.1 (as I can view it on the district website): Overall, I appreciate the district for taking a considerable a first step toward providing access to advanced educational programs. However, I believe the district has a long way to go to match access with equity.

My primary concern with 5755.1, is that I'm not able to see how the district will disseminate information to intentionally empower vulnerable groups to participate in the access and equity initiative. I also fear that without the appropriate outreach to vulnerable groups the access and equity policy may increase the risk of inequity.

Additional outreach and advisory services are needed to raise awareness amongst vulnerable groups and increase participation in access and equity program. This is extremely important for Special Needs and LGBTQ+ students, as these groups are faced with social and safety challenges well beyond the inherent academic pressures.

Finally, I would like to recommend adding new diversity identifiers and the option to self-identify to SOMSD Equity Report. I believe we should take a broader fact-based approach to understand where the district can make improvements to the policy.

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)

Overall, I believe anti-racist and unconscious bias training is helpful, but the effects may wear off quickly. To achieve long term success a comprehensive plan is needed to address the disparities. A few strategies I would recommend are:

- a. Student and teacher performance data should be analyzed holistically to identify areas of strength, weakness, and when bias may play a part. For example:
 - i. tracking how black students perform when taught by diverse teachers vs. white teachers overall and in specific subjects and why?
 - ii. How do black students perform in diverse classrooms vs. segregated classrooms and why?
 - iii. How do the outcomes differ when considering household income, mode of transportation, number of parents in the home, pre-care, after-care, access to Healthcare and why?
- b. Recruit and retain more teachers from diverse schools
- c. Recruit and retain teachers from diverse areas and socio-economic backgrounds

- d. Decisions about grades and discipline should be peer reviewed by several teachers with familiarity of the student
 - e. Develop in Cross-Cultural mentorship programs
 - f. Create additional touchpoints for parents and teacher to develop stronger relationships. Parent teacher nights, BOE and PTA meetings may not be the right setting to foster stronger relationships. I believe this would go a long way to reduce biased based decision making.
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.

This is a very difficult question for anyone running for the BOE. To decide upon policy that affects the safety and security of every student in the district is incredibly stressful in and of itself. There simply is no solution with respect to active shooter drills that is proven to be better than another.

I am supportive of keeping the tabletop approach and reducing or eliminating the frequency of the drills for younger students (if permitted by law). I would also seek the input of the community and other board members to determine the appropriate age for conducting physical drills.

Special consideration should be paid to students with disabilities, special needs students and parents that do not wish for their children to participate.

I am also a supporter of teaching older students ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate). The ALICE method teaches students and staff how to counter an assailant, when appropriate. I am also a supporter of teaching self-defense and anti-bullying in schools. I do not support under any circumstances promoting any form of victimhood or helplessness to our children.

Above all, I am supportive of fostering a nurturing and inclusive school environment that mitigates the probability of school shootings from ever occurring.

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 Please clarify your answer.

I'm afraid the Student Suspension & Expulsion Data available on the SOMSD website reports 0 suspensions for the period of 9/2020 – 5/2021. Based on the available date, I'm unable to comment regarding racially disproportionate discipline. I will point out that suspension and expulsion table lack the detail needed to draw conclusions anyway. For example if an altercation between students of different race, gender or sexuality should occur, I would want to know the root cause of the conflict, how each student participated and what kind discipline was doled out to each student and why? I believe a dashboard is needed to display, track, and analyze the additional data points that are missing from the Student Suspension & Expulsion Data chart. However. the dashboard should be an internal tool until the annual review. In addition, policy #5600 (as I can view it) appears to be adequate in terms of equitable application of discipline in my opinion.

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 I do. I would support a data and truth driven approach to hold teachers accountable for discrimination.

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 and I would love if we did. The pandemic worsened the disparities in access and opportunity facing students of color. The most obvious issues were a lack of technology suitable for virtual learning and access to reliable Wi-Fi in low income households. Additionally, parents of lower income families did not have nearly the same access to remote work. As a result, it was not uncommon for older students to be charged with care-taking for younger siblings and elders. Special needs students were separated from much needed services that require in person engagement. LGBTQ+ students were separated from affirming groups and supportive teachers. All students experienced some trauma and anxiety from being separated from friends and the activities they enjoy most. It will be difficult to recover from the pandemic but not impossible. I am supportive of doing whatever it takes to make up for lost time, education, and services for all children in the district. However, I would be remiss if it did not stress that keeping schools safe and open is a key competent to closing the gaps.

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.

Yes. I know all too well, the realities of violence in schools. During my first month as a freshman at Martin Luther King Jr. High School, a student was stabbed in a hallway and a shooting occurred in a stairwell. Shortly thereafter metal detectors were installed. I remember feeling a little safer knowing that if I got into a fight, I had one less thing to worry about – if the fight occurred in the school building. I remember fights breaking out in lunchrooms with such regularity that a SRO was permanently assigned. Simply put, I believe teachers and students should be kept safe and I support SRO's in our schools.

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. The construction of a new swimming pool should be included in the Long Range Facilities Plan (LRFP) as part of the districts' commitment to access and diversity, period. If we are committed to closing achievement gaps, let's also commit to closing gaps in safety and security for children of color. There are countless studies that cite up to 60% of black children can't swim. It's a known fact that the family membership fees for the Maplewood swimming pool can be up to 4x higher than South Orange. Not only is this discriminatory, it's foolish.

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.

Yes. If there is one thing this district does well it is allow everyone access to teachers, administrators and the board. The question should be rewritten to ask about the quality of the communication and the timeliness of the responses.