

## **Maura McMahon**

### **SEPTA School Board Candidate questionnaire – 2017**

#### **Question #1: What do you view to be the most significant issues facing APS?**

There are a number of great challenges facing APS stemming from, and exacerbated by, continually rising enrollment without a corresponding increase in resources or effective plan to meet capacity needs.

APS has implemented numerous initiatives without sufficient guidance and teacher training, contributing to a negative work climate for our teachers and increasing inconsistencies and inequities across our system. We are adding to our challenges before we adequately address existing ones.

We are struggling to keep pace and are operating in a reactive mode rather than providing proactive leadership. Without a change in mindset from our leadership, I fear we will fall farther behind and risk the future quality and reputation of Arlington public education. The students who are already the most under-served, will be even more under-served in the future as resources become more stretched and other priorities take precedence.

How will APS be able to provide the individualized attention each student needs? I believe we need to re-evaluate our priorities as a school system, determine a vision for our future, forge a partnership with the County, and develop an intricate network of school, community, County, and business resources. We need to reduce the competition for County resources among various departments and interest groups by developing a working collaborative network that will mutually benefit APS and the broader community and maximize APS' available resources to devote to areas of greatest need, including special education.

The School Board needs to get back in the driver's seat with proactive leadership: clear-up our menagerie of policies and practices; streamline initiatives; get the proper direction and training to teachers to implement the most important initiatives properly and effectively (especially the 1:1 digital technology and ATSS initiatives); and take the actions necessary to get ahead of our capacity problems.

#### **Question #2: What do you believe to be the most significant issues or challenges within APS relating to students with disabilities?**

At the most general level, APS' greatest challenge is to meet the unique needs of each individual student while balancing the needs of all students within the constraints of finite resources – and being able to do so as enrollment continues to rise without the corresponding rise in resources. This requires a commitment by APS to prioritize the needs of students with disabilities and to provide specific professional development training and flexible planning factors.

Another challenge involves the coordination of services and resources, within APS and with outside sources, and having proper formal procedures and policies with the flexibility to make appropriate case-by-case decisions that best meet the needs of individual students. Our parents

should not have to hire a lawyer for their child to be transferred to an appropriate classroom setting or to transfer out of a school that is unwilling or unable to sufficiently meet their child's needs. And we need to make sure there is careful coordination and good communication (with parents and between teachers and staff at both schools) as students transition from one school to another – whether due to the relocation of a special program, the child moving to a different school, or the student matriculating to the next education level.

Finally, it is one thing to create an inclusive classroom; but it is another to ensure inclusivity at the school level and to instill consistency across the system. This requires systemwide training and the enforcement of policies and appropriate practices. To offer a full- inclusive climate, all administrators and teachers need to be aware and familiar with students' true abilities, to know how to facilitate interactions between students with different abilities, and to have appropriate high-level expectations of students with special needs. All teachers need to understand that being knowledgeable and skilled in these areas is directly relevant to their job as teachers, regardless of what subjects or classes they teach, and will ultimately benefit all students. Genuine inclusivity is part of the overall climate, and the development of a cultural mindset takes time and commitment.

**Question #3: Describe your experience working with or on behalf of individuals with disabilities.**

I have had a range of experiences in this area, beginning in high school and extending through my professional career and civic involvement. One of my summer part-time jobs as a high school student was working in a group home for adult men. I assisted residents with daily living tasks and occasionally remained on the premises overnight to help provide 24-hour supervision and assistance.

While in college, I joined a group who made weekly visits to a residential facility for children with behavioral and mental health issues. Our purpose was to provide positive social experiences, spending time playing and interacting with the young residents.

My first civic appointment was to the City of Alexandria's Commission on Persons with Disabilities in the mid-1990's. The Commission provided advice to the Mayor, City Council, and City Manager on policies, programs, and legislation affecting Alexandria's residents with physical and sensory disabilities. Its mission is "to promote the rights of persons with disabilities by advocating for equality, dignity and independence through advising the community and advancing public awareness." As a member of the Commission, I also participated in awarding a scholarship and an outstanding advocate award.

Professionally, I worked as a claims analyst for eleven years with the Social Security Disability Insurance/Supplemental Security Income program in Ohio, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. Working with applicants and their representatives to document their medical conditions and the corresponding impacts on their abilities to engage in various activities and tasks, I determined their eligibility for disability benefits. The medical knowledge I gained from this experience provided significant insight into the range of abilities associated with various degrees of both physical and mental medical impairments in adults and children.

On a more personal level, my brother-in-law is an adult with non-verbal autism who lives in a group home and participates in a workshop program. My mother-in-law has been a strong advocate and was instrumental in working with other parents and the state of New Jersey to establish this home for their adult children so that they could enjoy a sense of independence and thrive in a community environment. ....

My direct experience with special education services in schools has been limited to the IEP process for one child. I know our family's experience with APS' services and procedures. As I have been talking with more APS parents of students with special needs, I have been learning about the inconsistencies and the needs that are not being met in APS. I understand that each family's experience is unique and that the quality or satisfaction of experiences vary from school to school.

In all honesty, special education services per se was not forefront in my mind or agenda when I started off seeking a seat on the School Board. I've been pushing on the point that schools need to be an integral component of our County's overall planning. But I have come to realize after talking with just a relatively few parents, that students with special needs are not even an integral component of APS' own overall planning, overshadowed by "more important" conversations and decision-making about capacity and overcrowding and graduation rates and test scores. When people talk about the achievement gap, they primarily focus on economically disadvantaged and English language learner students – only rarely have I heard someone mention our students with *other* special needs.

This points to the cultural mindset I referred to in the previous question. All of our students need to be a regular part of our daily interactions and conversations and decision-making.

**Question #4: Give one example of how APS shines in providing education and addressing the overall welfare of students with disabilities.**

I believe the best aspect of APS' special education services is its special education teachers and individual service providers. ... Parents of students with autism in the Aspergers/Autism program at Thomas Jefferson have offered only high praise and positive experiences and benefits for their children. And many parents point to APS' positive impact for students with dyslexia.

But needs and abilities are very unique from individual to individual student and not all are best served by the same resources or programs. The concerns parents have shared with me consistently relate to systemic issues: classroom placements, insufficient resources, inconsistencies in services and practices across schools, excessive principal autonomy and a lack of accountability, non-inclusive school climates, and a lack of teachers with specific types of training.

We have a lot of work to do. (And I have a new priority for my agenda.)

**What steps should APS take to improve the education and overall welfare of students with disabilities in Arlington?**

APS has to make sure there is consistency in resources, services, and policies from school to school. All of our schools and programs need to be able to provide the accommodations and services students need in order to foster greater inclusivity within classrooms, within and across schools, and to allow students to thrive in the least restrictive environments possible. It is important to provide consistency across schools on the basis of equity alone; but also for the benefit of students as they potentially move from one school to another for whatever reason.

Steps that can be taken:

1. Foster an inclusive environment through properly trained administrators and staff and by enforcing policies in each school systemwide. APS should have proper staffing and oversight to ensure the School Board's objectives and policies are enforced at the school level.
2. Conduct a thorough review, or "inventory" of sorts, to evaluate the resources and services at each school. This would include input from the families, teachers, and administrators.
3. Establish flexible planning factors to enable the allocation of resources and services according to need rather than according to strict numeric formulas.
4. Ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place and followed to evaluate individual students' progress – something APS' personalized learning initiative can theoretically facilitate if fully and properly implemented. It is important to know how well each student is being served and achieving according to his/her abilities and potential, and what may work best for which students. Not every child benefits equally, or at all, from the same approaches. Even though the IEP process monitors individual student progress, we need to be able to quantify and evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts in a way that informs decision-making at the higher level. What that looks like exactly, is something various parties need to work together to figure out.
5. Allow flexibility in policies to give principals the ability to accommodate the most appropriate placements for individual students.
6. Work closely with SEPTA and ASEAC – and facilitate greater collaboration between and among other advisory groups such as ACI, FAC, BAC, and CCPTA.

**Question #5: Describe your familiarity with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act.**

As a member of Alexandria's Commission on Persons with Disabilities, much of our work was focused on issues falling under Title II of the ADA – accessibility and accommodations. I am directly familiar with the IEP process ... including facilitating my child's self-advocacy for a change to eliminate a support my child felt was no longer needed. So I am familiar with the IEP process and have a general understanding of IEPs v. 504's.

While I have a general knowledge of the main underlying tenets of the various legislations, as a member of the School Board, I will expect to have the additional resources and expertise

needed for guidance and clarification of any relevant information necessary. If not, I will take steps to make sure I do. While I do not want to place additional burdens on parents who already expend much time and resources making sure their children receive the services they need both in and outside of school, we will always need the input and participation of parents, as they understand better than anyone else what their individual children need in order to fulfill their potential. Nevertheless, that should not be an excuse for the School Board or APS not to do their own due diligence and rely on parents to raise issues that need to be addressed.

As a school board member, I will commit to ensuring all students with disabilities are able to receive an appropriate, quality education in the least restricted environment possible and to adhere to legal requirements. But I do want to ensure that we have the flexibility needed to make reasonable appropriate decisions on a case-by-case basis, even when legal guidelines might suggest something different

**Question #6: What will you do to end inappropriate and undesired segregation of people with disabilities in Arlington?**

Our ability to end segregation starts with having a specific and effective procedure in place to verify placement decisions. This should be worked out collaboratively with parents, general education classroom teachers, special education teachers, administrators, and other relevant parties. The next step involves professional training and raising awareness for teachers and other staff and the parents of other children to create more inclusive environments in our schools. (An important part of being able to provide inclusive classrooms is communicating effectively with parents who may be concerned that their child's academic experience may be negatively impacted in some way, educating them, and reassuring that their child's needs are still being met.) APS needs to make sure every school is able to provide the services and resources students need and encourage more opportunities for inclusion. Additionally, APS should ensure sufficient expertise and staffing in the compliance office.

In general, we should review, revise, or establish goals and policies regarding inclusion with clearly defined goals and objectives and specific means to evaluate progress toward the identified goals. What is our definition of "inclusivity" and "inclusive environment"? In what ways do our classrooms and schools reflect those definitions? What are the specific steps we need to take to meet those definitions?

**What will you do to create additional meaningful inclusion opportunities for Arlington's students with disabilities?**

While "inclusion" most often refers to the classroom, I believe being recognized and part of the general conversations of the larger community are also a part of an inclusive environment. APS can do a better job highlighting the work, accomplishments, and activities of students with disabilities within their individual schools, as well as through APS communications such as School Talks and AETV and other venues not confined to Disability Awareness Month activities.

I would encourage initiatives to bring students of different backgrounds and varying abilities together via field trips, assembly activities, and appropriate instructional opportunities. In instances where that may not be feasible, we could create appropriate opportunities for students in other classes to join the students in self-contained classrooms for academic and/or social activities.

I would direct our administrators to work with SEPTA, parents, and staff to ensure students with disabilities are indeed in the least restrictive environments they can successfully be in and perhaps request regular specific reports from our compliance office (if not already required) to help ensure our policies are being followed. I would focus on teacher training, specifically in how to create inclusive classroom environments and how to facilitate interactions among students. I would also look into the ability to provide more classroom assistants or co-taught classes that can offer the support students need in order to take classes in less restrictive environments.

Finally, I would enlist the County Council of PTAs to devote time on their agenda for a presentation about inclusion and challenge PTAs to create at least one new meaningful inclusion opportunity at each of their schools. Each would then report back to CCPTA to share their experience and level of success and exchange ideas.

### **Question #7: What is your knowledge of and opinion of universal design in school building construction and renovation?**

Universal design works for everyone and should be part of all new construction moving forward. It would not make sense for a community claiming to be “inclusive” to not follow universal design principles. But as we make a comprehensive plan to address current and future capacity needs – which I believe APS must do – we need to include a plan to remodel our existing buildings. The current general capacity shortage we face will overshadow renovations to existing buildings. So, I would recommend a specific plan to target the modernization of all APS facilities to align with the principles of universal design to the extent possible.

APS needs to find ways to reduce costs of new construction so that more resources are available for remodeling existing buildings. But it still would be unlikely to have the resources or ability to retrofit all of its existing older buildings in a timely fashion so that current students will be assured to benefit. This is where my focus on developing a partnership with the County and looking beyond APS to the community and business sector resources could come into play. What other resources are there in our community? What opportunities to partner with developers or businesses may there be to update all of our facilities sooner than later?

Elements of universal design are currently part of the larger picture in our recently revised facilities policies, which give consideration to various factors such as natural light, air quality, flexible spaces, and furniture design. There are small steps that could be implemented in the near-term to replace doorknobs, adjust heights of water fountains, even install sensory strips under every desk - if the School Board and facilities staff prioritize it and budget for it.