



San Francisco Parent Action
www.sfparentaction.org

Questions for SFUSD School Board Candidates 2024

Matt Alexander

1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Somewhat Disagree, 3 = Somewhat Agree, 4 = Strongly Agree

<i>Excellent and Equitable Public Schools</i>	<i>Level of Agreement</i>
1. I SUPPORT the SF Parent Coalition Parent Priorities Platform . A focus on equity and excellence going hand-in-hand, improving student outcomes in our district, regaining trust and rebuilding community morale, improving the fiscal health of SFUSD, and overall good governance should be the top priorities of the School Board going into 2024-25.	4
3. TRANSPARENCY: I support increased transparency of school performance that enables San Francisco to evaluate and improve the quality of our public schools. This should include a public dashboard that shares math and reading assessment data at the school level, updated at least twice a year.	4
4. LITERACY AND MATH: I believe in the urgency of improving student outcomes in literacy and math at SFUSD. I commit to ensuring that SFUSD adopts a comprehensive and fully funded plan , and makes the necessary changes to our curricula, tools, and instruction methods that will follow an evidence- and standards-based instructional approach.	4
5. GOVERNANCE: An effective School Board follows the lead of and supports the superintendent and staff, letting them be the experts and making recommendations for the direction of the district.	4
6. BUDGET HEALTH: I commit to governing in accordance with nationally-established best financial practices . I will hold District leadership accountable for presenting the budget clearly. When fixing our budget deficit, I support SF Parents' call for minimizing negative impacts to our most vulnerable students while ensuring a baseline of excellence across all schools.	4

OPEN-ENDED: (all responses should be 250 words or fewer)

- 1 ***Optional: Expand on any of your responses to the statements above, in 250 words or fewer.***

My priorities on the board have mirrored your Parent Priorities Platform. Here are some key accomplishments in the platform areas:

Focus on student outcomes:

- Collaborated with President Motamedi to co-lead implementation of Student Outcomes Focused Governance approach
- Worked with colleagues to adopt [ambitious academic goals, along with guardrails reflecting our San Francisco values](#)
- Worked with the Board of Supervisors [to secure \\$8 million to expand a highly effective math program](#) from John Muir Elementary to other schools
- Connected staff with resources based on my expertise as an educator (e.g., advance copies of [Redesigning High Schools: 10 Features for Success](#), which I co-authored with State Board of Education President Linda Darling-Hammond)

Fixing the budget deficit:

- Worked with colleagues to close a \$125 million deficit while giving educators the largest raise in history, to attract and retain the best possible staff
- [Co-authored Proposition G, the Student Success Fund](#), which passed with 78% of the vote and is now bringing in \$35-60 million annually to support whole-child community schools
- Fought to uncover past fiscal mismanagement and [realign SFUSD's budget to prioritize schools and students over upper management](#)

Transparency and accountability:

- Worked with the Board of Supervisors to get the City's Budget and Legislative Analyst to produce an [independent report on SFUSD's excessive central office spending compared to peer districts](#)
- Worked with immigrant parents to write SFUSD's first-ever [policy on translation and interpretation](#)
- Collaborated with LGBTQ families and staff to develop [the District's guide for gender inclusive forms and communication](#)

- 2 ***Why are you running for the Board of Education? Within this response, please describe a) your connection to SFUSD students and families, and b) a description of your leadership style, experience, and/or training.***

I'm running for School Board to continue the work I've started, alongside my colleagues, to create the schools our students deserve.

I started my teaching career at Balboa High School in 1996, and over the past three decades I've seen SFUSD's many strengths, but I also watched the growth of some deep systemic problems, including fiscal and operational mismanagement, lofty rhetoric about equity and excellence but a lack of accountability for results, and a bureaucratic culture that's been unresponsive to the needs of students, families, and school-based staff. My colleagues and I on the current School Board have taken concrete steps to address these issues and lay the foundation for a much stronger SFUSD.

What I bring to the Board:

- Two decades of experience as a SFUSD teacher and principal, with deep educational expertise and a track record of success as an educator
- Four years of experience on the School Board during the most challenging times in recent memory, including this year as Vice President
- A grassroots community organizer and good listener who values the experiences and viewpoints of students, families, and school-based staff
- A values-based leader whose views are rooted in the needs of people not ideology
- A bold leader who is willing to hold people accountable and challenge the status quo when needed
- A team player who works well with others and finds common ground across difference
- A collaborator who has built relationships with City officials to bring in resources for SFUSD

3 ***Do you support the superintendent's [plan](#) to fix SFUSD's budget deficit, including but not limited to classroom consolidations and school closures?***

Yes. President Motamedi and I meet weekly with Superintendent Wayne to help guide the plan.

In 1996, the year I started teaching in SFUSD, we had 64,000 students, and this year we have 49,000. Fewer students means less state funding, so we have to decide if we want to keep spreading our resources thinly across 120 campuses, or if it makes more sense to have fewer schools which are each better resourced. For example, merging two tiny elementary schools can allow us to have one school with a full-time social worker, literacy coach, teacher collaboration teams, and better facilities.

But the track record of school closures in some other cities has been awful, and SFUSD's own past school closures have been deeply flawed, [with a disproportionate impact on the Black community and low-income students](#). So we need to get the process right. The Board is holding the Superintendent accountable to [our Guardrails](#), as well as [Attorney General Bonta's guidance](#), both of which require an authentic community engagement process and an equity impact assessment.

Our plan is still very much a work in progress, and we need your voice to help shape it. We've already heard that we should ensure historically marginalized students are not adversely impacted, and that we should protect options such as K-8s and small high schools for students who need them. I believe with community input and an equity lens, we can use our limited resources more effectively and create the schools our students deserve.

4 ***How can SFUSD increase academic [outcomes](#) for the most underserved students and close the racially predictable achievement gap?***

There are examples of teachers across SFUSD, and in a few cases entire schools, showing what's possible when we have high expectations for all students, coupled with the supports needed to meet them.

For example, in mathematics, only 11% of Black SFUSD students and 18% of Latino students met or exceeded standards on the 2023 state tests. But at John Muir Elementary School, 45% of Black students and 42% of Latino students met or exceeded standards. Back in 2015, Muir's test results looked almost exactly like SFUSD's, but the district's results have remained flat over the past 8 years, while Muir's have increased dramatically.

What's John Muir's secret? The school has carefully and consistently implemented an approach to elementary mathematics called *Teaching Through Problem Solving*, which includes a rigorous curriculum as well as a sophisticated instructional approach, alongside a program for in-depth teacher professional development known as *Lesson Study*.

What Muir's experience shows is that if we invest deeply in educators and build a culture of excellence, we can dramatically increase academic outcomes for all kids. That's why I worked with the Board of Supervisors to secure \$8 million in City funding to expand the John Muir project as a pilot at Malcolm X, Flynn, and Sanchez over the past two years. Now the approach is spreading to even more schools using the Student Success Fund. Even as we face budget challenges, we need to continue these kinds of targeted investments to improve student outcomes for all students.

5 *How can SFUSD challenge and create learning opportunities for higher achieving students?*

Just as SFUSD has historically struggled to close opportunity gaps, we've also struggled to challenge students when they're ready to go beyond grade-level standards. This is important not just for a subset of students, but for all of our children: All students are capable of high achievement when they feel safe, valued, and seen for who they are.

When the Board adopted our Goals and Guardrails in 2022, I helped craft the Curriculum and Instruction guardrail in a way that emphasizes how students should not just be given "the basics" but also challenged to meet standards of excellence: "The superintendent will not allow curriculum and instruction that is not rooted in excellence, challenging and engaging, student-centered, culturally responsive, or differentiated to meet the academic needs of all students." SFUSD's "Deeper Learning" pedagogical approach is consistent with these expectations, as is the new literacy curriculum we adopted—but we still have work to do in ensuring that teachers have the training, support, and collaboration needed to create these opportunities in every classroom.

At the secondary level, the Board adopted a student outcome goal based on [California's College and Career Readiness indicator](#), through which a student is considered "College/Career Ready" if they meet different combinations of criteria, including:

- Passing AP exams
- Taking college courses
- Completing a Career Technical Education Pathway (including internships)
- Completing UC/CSU requirements

These are all challenging learning opportunities, and now we need to enhance our high school offerings so that all students have access to them.

6 *What should SFUSD do to increase enrollment and to attract more students and families to the San Francisco Unified School District, at elementary, middle, and/or high school entry points?*

My children are 21-year-old twins, but I'm still on the email list from their co-op preschool. Last week, the preschool newsletter included an article from a parent who commented, "My husband and I always joked that we would leave San Francisco by the time our eldest was ready for kindergarten. The [SFUSD] lottery system felt way too complicated and intimidating."

This parent's feelings about SFUSD's enrollment system are widely shared, including among

parents who can't afford to move or choose private schools. I believe the most important thing we can do to increase enrollment is to fix our broken enrollment system (more on that in #7).

Of course, we also need to ensure that all of our schools are safe learning environments where students are challenged and supported academically. If SFUSD schools are fully staffed, serve the whole child, and promote academic excellence, more families will want to enroll.

Finally, SFUSD's enrollment will increase if more families live in San Francisco. One area where this is happening now is among asylum-seeking immigrants. Last year SFUSD had over 1500 new immigrant students, and this year we've already enrolled nearly 1600—the largest numbers by far in the past decade. We need to continue welcoming these newcomer families, in line with our values as a Sanctuary City, and we need to advocate with the City to provide more affordable housing for them and other working-class and low-income families, so they are not forced out due to the high cost of housing.

7 What do you think of SFUSD's lottery system of enrollment?

SFUSD spends millions of dollars a year on an enrollment system that offers an illusion of choice while actually creating high levels of anxiety for students and families. The system also creates unpredictable school enrollments, which makes it challenging for schools to do budgeting and for district staff to allocate resources effectively.

The Board of Education voted in 2018 to change the elementary assignment system and then in 2020 voted to move to a zone-based system. The new system still has not been implemented.

It's time to stop kicking the can down the road and actually fix our broken assignment system. I believe that our new system should include not only elementary, but also middle and high schools. Families deserve a predictable enrollment system that assigns students to schools reasonably close to where they live and offers alternative options for students who need them—with a minimum of anxiety and stress.

It's also worth considering the fiscal impacts. SFUSD has a department called the Educational Placement Center that manages our complex enrollment system and helps families navigate it. This department, which doesn't exist in most school districts, costs us over \$3 million a year. It's not clear how that investment is leading to improved student outcomes.

Finally, the current system was originally adopted with the stated purpose of desegregating schools, which it has not accomplished. A simpler and more transparent system would be cheaper, less stressful, and more likely to produce the diverse schools most San Franciscans want.

8 How did you vote on Prop G (8th Grade Algebra) and why? What are the top three areas to focus on in math currently to improve math outcomes for kids at SFUSD?

I voted "yes" on Prop G because I support all SFUSD students having access to algebra in 8th grade, both the content of algebra as well as UC/CSU approved credit.

I know there are some who oppose 8th grade algebra due to legitimate concerns about tracking. I share these concerns, but I don't think the answer is to limit access to algebra. There are examples of schools and districts that have implemented 8th grade algebra equitably, and we can too.

Providing access alone will not ensure that students are ready for algebra. To accomplish that, and to meet our 8th grade math goal, we can do what John Muir Elementary did (see #4) and adopt a research-based approach that follows the example provided by Japan, which has among the highest elementary mathematics achievement in the world. The three focus areas would be:

- 1 *Adopt a new math curriculum that is problem-based*—organized around problems that are carefully selected to motivate students to think, to analyze different ways of solving problems, and to develop their understanding of key mathematical concepts
- 2 *Adopt an instructional approach that is student-centered*—including time for individual thinking and writing, informal small group conversation with peers, and whole-class discussion where students explain and defend their ideas, and the teacher helps the class process key learnings
- 3 *Adopt a teacher professional development approach such as Lesson Study*, which involves in-depth study of the curriculum, instructional methods, and the students, coupled with live lesson observations and debriefs, supported by outside experts

9 ***What was your position on the school board recall of February 2022, and why?***

I opposed the February 2022 recall because [it was backed by over \\$2 million from billionaires and venture capitalists](#). I don't think they should be the ones making decisions about our public schools.

At the same time, I understand and respect that many SFUSD parents supported the recall for good reasons having nothing to do with big money. It's also true that in the months after the recall, thanks to Commissioner Lam's leadership in a very challenging time, the school board stabilized itself, hired a new superintendent, and embarked on Student Outcomes Focused Governance—all of which laid the foundation for the progress we're now beginning to see in SFUSD.

In the regular November 2022 elections, with local campaign finance rules in place, the three winning candidates collectively spent less than \$150,000. And thanks to that decision of the voters, I have the honor of working with three fantastic colleagues, Commissioners Weismann-Ward, Motamedi, and Fisher. Moving forward, I hope we can all work together to avoid recalls and ensure that school board elections are not big money affairs but rather models of grassroots democracy.

10 ***Who will you look to as your trusted sources of feedback, information, and advice as you make decisions as a BOE Commissioner? In what ways will you engage with and solicit feedback from community members?***

In my time on the Board, I've prioritized listening to students, families, and front-line staff who work in our schools. Too often in the past, these groups have been ignored or overlooked by decision-makers in SFUSD, such as when prior district management decided to change school start times without any input from families.

This is especially true for groups that have been historically marginalized, such as Black families, immigrant families, students with IEPs, and others. I've worked to shift that dynamic, such as when I collaborated with immigrant parents at Buena Vista Horace Mann [to get SFUSD to keep a promise made back in 2016 for much-needed renovations](#), or when I worked with Grattan parents to ensure their school had adequate staffing for students with IEPs.

It's also important that whenever possible, we have collaborative relationships with the unions representing our workers, such as the educators represented by UESF and the clerks, cafeteria workers, and custodians represented by SEIU. These are the staff who have the greatest impact on the daily experience and education of our kids.

The first Guardrail my colleagues and I adopted in 2022 tells the Superintendent that he may not make major decisions without "meaningful consultation with the parents/guardians, students, and staff who will be impacted by those decisions." One example of improvement is that this year, for the first time ever, draft school budgets were released in January rather than March, allowing time for school communities to request changes when needed.