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Questions for SFUSD School Board Candidates 2024

PARAG GUPTA

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

| Excellent and Equitable Public Schools | Level of Agreement |
|---|--------------------|
| 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 |
| 2. 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 |
| 3. 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 |
| 4. 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 |
| 5. 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 |

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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.**

The next four years are going to be critical for SFUSD with a potential \$421 million deficit, school closures, and failing standards in K-8 math and literacy to name a few. How we address these challenges will determine the viability of SFUSD and our city's ability to attract and retain families for years, if not decades to come. We must elect four school board candidates who will bring excellence and the ability to make difficult decisions.

As a newly-elected member of the San Francisco's Democratic County Central Committee (DCCC), I am centering the San Francisco Democratic Party on the ideals mentioned above. The first thing I did was introduce the [SF Democratic Party's SFUSD platform resolution](#) that promotes a public school system centered on student outcomes; quality neighborhood school system that is attractive to all families and prioritizes both excellence and equity; and encourages fiscal responsibilities and policies that will lead to the retention and growth of overall SFUSD attendance and eventual student graduation. The resolution was drafted after seeking input from School Board members. I will continue to emphasize these ideals and work shoulder to shoulder with the current School Board, teachers, and families.

I have the ability and a proven track record to make difficult decisions that SFUSD needs. I will be a board member who will support SFUSD staff and teachers and set students up for success.

- 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 am a proud SFUSD parent. Ava, my daughter, is graduating from Chinese Immersion School (CIS) at DeAvila and will attend Roosevelt Middle School next year. I served on CIS' School Site Council (SSC) for five years including three as the Chair. I was part of the inaugural SF Parents Board Bootcamp and served on the implementation workgroup for 8th Grade Algebra. Most recently, [I was elected to the DCCC](#), having received the most votes out of any first-time candidate in AD-19.

I've worked in community for 25 years. I started as a [Bridgespan](#) consultant where I created strategy recommendations for leading non-profit organizations. I also have a Masters in Public Policy from the Harvard Kennedy School. Previously, as a foundation Chief Program Officer, I developed a nine-figure philanthropic strategy to provide

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10,000 youth from low-resource Bay Area families with postsecondary opportunities that would otherwise have been unavailable. Examples include coordinating with SFUSD to fund existing nonprofit partners to create a college-going mindset or provide holistic mentoring for Sunnydale youth.

As the Mercy Housing Chief Program Officer, I oversee the impact created with residents through financial well being, health, and youth programming. Mercy Housing is the largest nonprofit affordable housing organization in the US with 45,000 residents and \$4.4B in assets. In three years, I've changed the culture in the 40-year old institution from a compliance mindset to one of impact measurement and accountability to its residents.

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

Having attended two Resource Alignment Initiative town halls, I support the process and commend the Superintendent for addressing a structural deficit problem that has materialized over many years. We don't yet have enough information to assess what has been presented so far. As a Board Member, I will make difficult budget decisions while also focused on narrowing student achievement gaps and balancing important factors such as equity and accessibility.

I recognize that potential school closures will result in meaningful disruptions to impacted students, teachers, and families and that is why thorough stakeholder engagement must continue. Ultimately, the goal is to find a solution that best supports the needs of all SFUSD students while ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of the district. I strongly believe that SFUSD needs to remain in control by San Franciscans, and not be taken over by the State of California.

I also believe there is opportunity in the school closures to focus on excellent neighborhood schools that provide predictability to our SFUSD families and instill confidence in the school excellence their child(ren) will attend. Consolidating resources into fewer schools provides the opportunity to create excellence but must be handled delicately to build trust.

Finally, the central office can take stock of initiatives that are critical towards the achievement of student outcomes and cut those that are non-critical. I will also look into additional areas for budget reduction such as administrative cost and revenue such as from philanthropy.

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

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First, it is important to recognize the step forward by the School Board in adopting the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) Vision Values Goals and Guardrails in October 2022 so that we can hold ourselves accountable. We must build on this work.

SFUSD has identified interim goals and guardrails such as kinder end-of-year reading for Black and Pacific Islander students or chronic absenteeism¹ which disproportionately affects Black, Pacific Islander, and American Indian populations at 50%+ rates².

Understanding this data, the Board can then prioritize the most critical drivers with the superintendent, partner with the city government or third-party sources, and continue to hold the school district accountable for achieving results in a transparent manner.

From my 25 years of working in community, I've learned to consider the whole child - not only in the classroom but the other 18 hours as well. Many student challenges come from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), unstable housing, food insecurity, additional family or work responsibilities, and so on. We should share this data with relevant city departments to target solutions such as prioritizing low-income families with children attending public schools to attain affordable housing - something Mercy Housing has done in King County with the Seattle municipality.

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

We can't have a world class city without a world class public education system. We need to promote excellence that attracts and retains families of all economic backgrounds. When I knocked on over 1,000 doors for my DCCC campaign, I heard frustration from families about needing to “put up with the school system” or sharing they are leaving San Francisco public schools to get their children a quality education. We should celebrate Lowell and sustain it AND create excellence within all neighborhood schools.

To create excellence in all schools, the evidence base points to the most important factors being teacher quality, academic rigor, and a positive school culture³. To attract and retain high quality teachers, we must pay them well and on time. This requires fiscal discipline. To ensure academic rigor and a positive school culture, we must require transparency and accountability with what we prioritize and continually improve upon. An important benefit of doing so is being able to also better track when predictable achievement gaps and take early steps to address them.

¹ [SFUSD Updated Interim Goals and Guardrails](#)

² [SFUSD Data Department](#)

³ [“Factors Contributing to School Effectiveness: A Systematic Literature Review”](#), [Eur J Invest Health Psychol Educ](#). 2023 Oct; 13(10): 2095–2111

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Finally, we need to have high expectations for all children and provide support needed so that they can reach their potential. For example, we need to add courses that will interest students such as computer science and art. We also need to include more AP classes and CTE pathways and dual enrollment in City College at all high schools.

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?**

Increasing enrollment to SFUSD may depend on external factors: demographic shifts and high cost of living. However, SFUSD can focus to improve its credibility with the public and narrow student achievement gap:

- 1) **Elementary School:** Revising the school lottery system that is simple for families to understand, balances family choice and equity, and allows families to stay closer to their neighborhoods. Predictability helps build trust between families and the school system, leading to a higher likelihood of continued enrollment in subsequent years. Families entering elementary schools particularly find the current lottery system overwhelming. Those with options move to other jurisdictions or apply to independent schools.
- 2) **Middle School:** Providing strong 8th grade Algebra instruction is an important factor for many families to stay in SFUSD. In addition, promoting a sense of belonging within the school community is crucial for middle school students. This involves fostering an inclusive environment where students feel valued, and encouraged to participate in extracurricular activities.
- 3) **High School:** Offering high-quality education across the City and at all schools. This encompasses several aspects, such as employing well-trained teachers, maintaining facilities and equipment, and implementing evidence-based curricula with strong student outcomes. Keeping Lowell and SOTA as merit-based schools is important AND need to ensure that all high schools across the City provide high quality education, with AP classes and CTE pathways at all high schools.

Enrollment and student retention should be an important school district dashboard indicator so SFUSD may better understand key issues that are retaining or driving away families.

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

I have experienced the SFUSD lottery twice. The first time was for my daughter's elementary school, which was a nerve-wracking experience. I found the process to be

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confusing with many options. We entered over 20 schools and were very fortunate to have received our first choice at CIS. We have truly loved the six years at CIS. The second time was this year as my daughter applied for middle school. This was a better experience given the feeder system provided more predictability. However, we still have several friends who weren't able to get into their feeder schools in the first round.

I have observed that the current lottery system creates confusion and barriers for many families considering entering and staying in the SFUSD system. [PPSSE](#) has also shared low engagement from families of color and low-income families. As such, the well-intentioned aim of the lottery is not achieving its desired outcome.

What will be important is to create a revised system where we can optimize for the following: family choice, predictability, proximity to home and workplaces, equity, and excellent neighborhood schools. I recognize that this is difficult and complex to balance. I look forward to seeing the [revised school assignment system](#) soon. While I would have hoped that the new system could be implemented sooner than 2026, after the BOE called for one in 2018, I recognize that budget deficit and potential school consolidation priorities may add an additional layer of complexity.

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?

While it was a non-binding proposition, I [was in strong support](#) for Prop G as it was critical for San Francisco voters to send a strong message to the Board of Education on the importance of a strong math foundation for our students. Beyond 8th grade algebra, however, I was disappointed to see the results of the [SFUSD Math Audit](#) found meaningful deficiencies for K-8 grades. I was disheartened to see the SFUSD Math Task Performance levels in the [SFUSD Student Performance Analysis](#). African American students performed math tasks at 41% proficiency compared to 80+% proficiency for white or Asian peers indicating SFUSD has a far way to go in closing the achievement gap.

The [Math Audit findings](#) and recommendations touch upon my earlier focus in question 5 on academic excellence. Specifically:

- 1) High Quality Teachers: Providing more guidance and support for teachers
- 2) Academic Rigor: Streamlining math content and using high quality material called for by standards
- 3) Positive School Culture: Creating an expectation of achievement and a sense of belonging

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

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When the pandemic first started, my daughter was in 1st grade and those were the critical years for reading and number sense. At the time, I was the Chair of the School Site Council, and I saw the data that showed meaningful learning loss as a result of the 1.5-year long school closure for many children at my daughter's school. While my family had flexible jobs that enabled us to provide supplemental teaching at home, many families were not able to do so.

Therefore, I was in strong support for the school board recall. I was actively involved in gathering the signatures needed for the recall within my school community. I was particularly concerned about the lack of urgency in even discussing the reopening of the schools, which I believe to show a negligence of duty by the BOE members, and a complete disregard for student well-being and student outcome.

During my DCCC campaign, I heard from many voters on what they seek in an elected official: someone who listens, someone who puts the public interest above their own best interest, and someone who makes decisions based on data and evidence. That is my philosophy as an elected member of the DCCC and will be my intent if I were fortunate enough to be elected as a BOE member.

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?

When I was at the Stupski Foundation, I made a practice of starting with the evidence base so I could understand which issues to prioritize, what questions to ask and which communities to center on. After gathering the data, I would then discuss directly with communities most impacted by the policies of SFUSD. I would speak to students, families, teachers, and principals to understand their challenges and their recommendations. Through my active engagement with the SF Parents Coalition and the Westside Families Democratic Club, I would in particular seek feedback from parents on the best student-centered approach. It will also be important to consider the perspectives of SFUSD staff, teachers, and labor partners including, United Educators of San Francisco, SEIU 1021, and Building Crafts.

I would also seek to hear from voices that may be less well represented such as the English Language Learner community as I actively sought to do when I was SSC Chair. I also would seek perspectives from families in Bayview/Hunters Point and Excelsior, which have some of the highest per capita number of youth. I would also actively engage with voices that I may not completely agree with to hear from diverse voices. I would also seek counsel from current and former Board of Education Commissioners with experience on how to balance and weigh competing issues, such as Commissioners Weissman-Ward, Motamedi and Lam (who has offered to continue to offer guidance even if she does not continue as a School Board Member).