

Candidate's Name: ___Deirdre Brown_____

1. Do you believe the district's current access and equity policy goes far enough in addressing systemic racism, issues of inequality, and the needs of vulnerable student populations, i.e. OPC, queer, special education students, immigrants, second-language learners, etc? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

No. We clearly need to do more to address systemic racism, issues of inequality, and the needs of vulnerable student populations. This is evidenced by the persistent achievement gap, the lack of proportionate representation of students of color in AP classes, and by the number of students we send out of district to receive Special Education services. We must take action to prioritize implementing the recommendations made by Dr. Fergus in the Equity Audit, and in audits of our Special Education Department. We must develop milestones, time frames, and measures to hold ourselves accountable. We must also ensure we have systems in place to collect and use data to track progress on these key efforts and to understand if they are having the effects intended, especially decreasing the achievement gap.

We must create safe spaces for students, which includes trusted staff they can talk with, share their experiences and feelings, and know they are being taken seriously. I am happy that we now have a Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying policy to protect students from prejudices, but we can do better to ensure it is adhered to by district personnel. I have had personal experience with this policy and found the time frames outlined in the policy were not met. I had to email multiple times to remind district personnel that the policy needed to be followed and did not get resolution until after months of delay. I know my experience is not unique.

Further, as a district we must continue to educate our teachers and the community on the subtleties of systemic racism and other biases. This includes providing our teachers and administrators the professional development they need to support all students, and in particular, BIPOC and other marginalized students. We must employ culturally responsive teaching, including the use of culturally relevant curricula, which has been shown to empower and engage all students, but which is especially important for engagement of students of color who have been historically marginalized in the classroom. I am proud that Columbia High School is participating in the pilot for AP African American Studies in opposition of other states and districts who refuse to acknowledge this important part of our Nation's history.

I pledge to work toward a district that serves, supports, and lifts up every student—regardless of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, religion, special needs, or immigration status. As part of that promise I am committed to increasing my knowledge and understanding of how prejudices of any kind negatively impact the life of all. It will continue to take purposeful effort, hard

work, and dialogue with a variety of stakeholders to create a culture of equity and inclusion in our district—one that acknowledges and accounts for varied life experiences, hears and lifts up all voices, and celebrates and supports all students.

2. Does the current SOMSD Intentional Integration Initiative do enough to address systemic racism experienced by Black and other students of color in schools? Yes or No. If applicable, please clarify your answer with your own ideas about how continuing racism may be addressed beyond current plans.

No. The current SOMSD Intentional Integration Initiative does not do enough to address systemic racism experienced by Black and other students of color in our schools. In fact, we do not have academic data yet to even know if the Intentional Integration Initiative of rebalancing our schools has made any dent in the achievement gap. We will not begin to know this until the first set of data are available in the Spring of 2025. We have made little progress in implementing the recommendations made by Dr. Fergus. This must be a priority to further address systemic racism in our school district. I support efforts made by the district to hire more teachers and administrators of color. There is strong evidence pointing to the link between having race and gender-matched role models to academic achievement. I also support continued bias training for our teachers—this should be evergreen. As noted in the above question, we need to create safe spaces for students—which includes trusted staff they can speak with and affinity groups—to share experiences and feelings and know they are taken seriously. We can do more to engage students and help them feel like they belong, and are supported, in higher level courses, such as AP classes. A possible component of this could be greater, and more consistent, involvement of supportive counselors, starting in the early school years and continuing through students' educational journey, to establish trusting, encouraging relationships. Again, as noted in the above question, through teacher professional development and other initiatives we can do more to improve our messages, expectations, and curricula so that students of color know they belong in—and are prepared for—higher level courses, such as AP classes. This engagement, trust-building, teaching, and positive expectations must start well before high school.

Whatever steps we take, we must be sure we are engaging and listening to the families we are intending to help and those most impacted. Our surveys to families have been poorly designed and tend to get responses from the most vocal, engaged parents. I do not believe we have done enough engagement and outreach to lower-SES families and families with students of color before, or since, we implemented the Intentional Integration Initiative, even though those families have been disproportionately impacted by the Initiative. What are their feelings about the Initiative? How has it impacted them and their children? What is working well and what can be improved? These types of questions need to be asked, and responses taken into account, with any new initiative the district intends to implement, and as it monitors implementation.

Voices that are often marginalized in our society, need to be at the table.

3. 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. I do not support the placement of School Resource Officers in SOMSD schools. School Resource Officers increase the likelihood of students coming in contact with the criminal justice system, as well as increases in suspensions and expulsions. Furthermore, these outcomes are more pronounced for male students and disproportionately affect students with disabilities and students of color.

However, we must do more to improve school safety and protect our students. Our high school is clearly not safe, evidenced by the spring incident when students from another school entered the building to fight Columbia High School students. School safety has been a recurring issue brought up by student representatives on the BOE for the past 2 years. Additionally, gun violence in schools is a tragic possibility. If elected I would look forward to working with and hearing from Mr. Valles, our head of safety and security, to see how we can continue to improve in this area. One place where I know we can improve is the professionalism of our school security guards, but this will take training, as well as compensation commensurate with the importance of the job. Further, we need better standard operating procedures for the security guards and improved oversight around their roles and responsibilities.

4. Do you believe that punitive discipline measures like suspension and expulsion should be used more or less than they currently are? Please answer “more” or “less,” and please clarify your answer. What strategies do you think will be effective to ensure that all students, particularly those targeted because of a marginalized identity, are safe and have an environment where they are able to learn?

My ultimate hope is that we would not have a need for any suspensions or expulsions. Our District implemented a suspension moratorium that I understand to be currently the operating posture. In general, I believe suspensions should absolutely be minimized, especially because students of color receive disproportionate suspensions—and harsher punishments in general—compared to white students. I strongly support restorative justice practices. I attended the restorative justice sessions hosted by the district in spring 2024. I am happy Dr. Gilbert and his team are leading the charge of bringing this mentality and practice to our district. However, there are some extreme offenses where suspension may be warranted. I believe we can create structures and monitoring practices, such as an independent review board, that supports teachers’ and administrators’ ability to enforce codes of conduct while also minimizing bias.

At this point, a suspension moratorium does not clearly align with the district code of conduct,

which does allow for suspension or expulsions for infractions that are highly serious, cause imminent danger to self or other, or are habitual. The code of conduct, restorative practices policies, and any suspension policies should work in concert to create clear boundaries and resulting consequences for students. These three policies should provide a holistic approach to discipline—one that supports and protects students, teachers, and administrators. Non-biased implementation is the key factor. If elected to the board, I would like to learn more about how these policies interplay in practice, how they can be improved to serve all, and especially how we can protect our students of color from bias and disproportionate accusations and punishments. Again, data is an important aspect of monitoring all discipline practices to identify potential biases.

5. In the last several years, state law has been updated to align with nationwide recommendations for active shooter drills advocated by SOMA Justice and other SOMA community members, such as announcing that a drill is a drill. Still, state law does not mandate recommendations such as advanced notice for drills (required in a number of states including Florida and Texas), using more tabletop drills that instruct students on what to do in an emergency and less acting it out, minimizing/eliminating police presence (so that children are not confused about whether it is an actual emergency and officers are able to get familiar with building after students have left), and/or allowing students to opt out if impacted by anxiety/mental health. Do you support bringing our current policy in line with the [recommendations](#) from Everytown, American Federation of Teachers, [National Association of School Psychologists](#), and [National Association of School Resource Officers](#)? Yes or No. Please clarify your answer.

Yes. I generally support bringing our current policy in line with the nationwide recommendations for active shooter drills advocated by SOMA Justice, SOMA Chapter of Moms Demand Action and other SOMA community members and in line with state law. We can prepare our students for these tragic scenarios that are plaguing our country, while also protecting their physiological safety. Students' responses to these drills can vary dramatically, and for some, can be trauma-inducing. Updating our policy, which actually does already align with some of these recommendations, can only further protect our students from unnecessary trauma and fear. My only caveat is that I am unclear how we could implement the sixth recommendation: "schools should track data about the efficacy and effects of drills." It is not immediately clear to me how such data could be collected, but if elected, I would certainly work with others, including the aforementioned SOMA community groups and members, to learn how such collection is viable and could be implemented in our district.

6. In 2013, the BOE voted to not repair the almost 100-year old pool in Columbia High School, while the BOE assured the community that it would work with the towns for a "year-round community pool" to provide every child in the district with access to

swimming and swim lessons. In 2023, the current BOE moved forward with destroying the high school pool, ending the only public and free water safety program in our towns. Do you believe the school district should fulfill its promise to ensure that SOMA students learn to swim? Yes or no. Please explain what you would propose.

Yes. The district can do more to help ensure that SOMA students learn to swim. Learning to swim is a necessary safety measure all children should have access to. I believe our towns have the ability to provide swim lessons to all children, and that this should occur when children are young. I believe the district can do more to engage with municipal partners to make this a reality. For example, it is my understanding that the towns provide financial support to low income families at both pools. The district could help advertise this assistance, especially to families who receive free and reduced lunch. There may even be opportunities to partner to create after school swim lessons for elementary school students with financial support for students in need.

7. What services do you think SOMSD can reasonably develop in-district over the next 5 years to better support neurodiverse students and students with emotional regulation challenges?

To better support neurodiverse students and students with emotional regulation challenges, we can develop a comprehensive in-district program that incorporates best practices in inclusive education and social-emotional learning. The district has conducted a Special Education audit, with results to be released in the fall. I hope we can use it as a roadmap for improving our supports for neurodiverse students and students with emotional regulation challenges. Additionally, we have an immediate need to fill our current 15 Special Education vacancies.

Ideally, I would like to see expansion of professional development opportunities so that all staff better understand and meet the needs of neurodiverse learners and students with emotional regulation challenges. For example, training in culturally responsive teaching would help ensure that educators are equipped to create inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students. I would like to see expansion of specialized classrooms staffed with trained educators and support staff, including behavior specialists, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals. It would be ideal if we could offer therapies, such as speech and occupational therapy.

Our district should continue to build tiered systems of support—which are only in their infancy in the district—to allow for differentiated levels of academic and behavioral intervention based on student needs and talents. Often students who struggle in one area, have immense talents in another. We need to ensure district staff are identifying and supporting both needs. We have limited to no programming for twice exceptional students—this is not acceptable. Enhancements

to Career and Technical Education and building back our arts program are also means through which we can serve our children. We need a diverse set of programs to meet our students' diverse needs and talents.

8. Should making more gender neutral restrooms available in schools be a priority? Yes or no. Please clarify your answer. What will you do to help ensure that students of all gender identities have unstigmatized access to bathrooms where they feel safe and welcome?

Yes. Making gender neutral restrooms available in schools should be a priority. All students in our district should feel safe and welcome. Having gender neutral restrooms is an important component of this. Each school has at least one gender neutral restroom, as well as unisex bathrooms but this may not be enough based on students' needs. Principals should be tracking the needs of their students, including through engagement with LGBTQ+ affinity groups at the middle and high schools. If students feel their needs are not met, then the administration should find a solution to offer more gender neutral restrooms.

9. Do you support making cost estimates and budgets public in order to allow community members to evaluate how aligned SOMSD's spending practices are to its commitment to equity? Yes or no. How will you ensure that this happens as a member of the board?

Yes, I support making cost estimates and budgets public to allow community members to evaluate how aligned the district's spending practices are to its commitment to equity. More transparency is clearly needed as demonstrated by our \$9.5M deficit that was not made public until winter 2024—this is unacceptable.

Transparency in budgeting is a cornerstone of trust between the district and the community. By openly sharing financial information, the district can demonstrate accountability and provide stakeholders with the opportunity to see how funds are being allocated, particularly in relation to programs and initiatives aimed at promoting equity.

To ensure this happens, as a member of the board I would advocate for the regular publication of detailed budget reports that are easily accessible and understandable for community members. This can include hosting budget workshops and town hall meetings to provide context for spending decisions and gather community input. I would also work to ensure that the budget presentation includes a clear breakdown of how funds are being directed toward equity-focused initiatives. Implementing these practices will help foster a culture of transparency and accountability in the district's financial decisions.

10. Do you prioritize dismantling racism and other forms of oppression in your everyday

work, either as a member of the community or in another role? Please give specific examples of how you have done this.

Yes. Dismantling systemic racism is absolutely a core value I hold. The primary reason my husband and I moved to Maplewood-South Orange was because of the value we place on diversity. We wanted our children to grow up in a rich environment where all individuals—regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or religious affiliation—feel welcome and thrive. I donate to Bryan Stevenson’s Equal Justice Initiative. I am also a member of the DEIA community of practice at my employer. This group hosts facilitated discussions, creates spaces for experience sharing, and works to ensure our work is conducted with a DEIA lens. I have generally always thought of myself as an empathic, socially-conscious person. However, through participation in safe, facilitated discussions where I have had the opportunity and privilege to hear about others’ lived experiences, I have expanded my worldview. I firmly believe these types of opportunities are paramount to obtaining a deeper understanding of the systemic racism and oppression faced by so many BIPOC and other marginalized groups. I would love to see more sharing opportunities in our district.

If you are an incumbent or former school board member:

Please describe any work you have already done as a member of the school board that is related to any of these questions.