

2019 St Paul DFL School Board Candidate Questionnaire – Omar Syed

1. NO
2. I was born in Somalia and came to the United States in the 1990s from refugee camps in Kenya. I had my first formal school training after coming to this country, graduating from Arlington High School and going on to Century College for a license as a pharmacy technician. I owe my success in this field and as a business man to this education. My son is also a student of Saint Paul Public Schools. I am running because I see the importance of strong public education. But also I am running as an active community member. Because the East African and other immigrant communities are becoming a larger part of the school-age population, it is vitally important that persons from these communities have representation on the school board, which is why I will not abide by the endorsement if I am not endorsed. This representation is too important. Many of the issues facing the District can be addressed if there is better understanding between the District and these communities. I believe I can provide a link towards this better understanding.
3. Students will need to know how to interact and work with people from all types of backgrounds and belief systems. They will need to know how to analyze problems, find and assess information for accuracy and relevance, formulate solutions, and evaluate the effectiveness of those solutions. They must be able to communicate this information and process. They must be flexible in their thinking, have open minds to new ideas, and be able to incorporate those new ideas with older knowledge. They need to have a strong work ethic, an ability to work in teams and alone, be comfortable with change (not just in technology but in information and relationships), and an understanding of how the world works. They must be life-long learners, but teachers as well – willing to share. They need to understand the importance of community and of their place in it and obligations to it. The District can help by modeling this kind of behavior in the world and to other groups. It needs to be strong on the basics of education, but create spaces for students to both share their views of the world and be safely vulnerable as they learn new things. The District needs to have teachers and staff that reflect the communities we live in. The District needs to do what it can to insure that our public schools reflect the public they serve.
4. That the school system is concerned about community partnerships is a good thing, but there are still improvements that could be made here. That the school system states that it is committed to open communication is also a good thing, but not everyone communicates in the same way – again, improvements could be made. That the school system sees the value of planning – for capital improvements, for programming, for strategy – is important, but the processes need to be made easier to understand for all families, and they need to have built in flexibility.
5. I believe the policies on discipline need to be improved. Restorative Justice practices could help with this as well as helping parents from all cultures understand school expectations and the discipline process. We need to build trust. The parent/school interactions also need to be improved. This is especially true when cultural differences are involved. This is something that I feel I can help with directly. Finally, I think the process and policies around teacher hiring need improvement so that we can be sure that our qualified teachers are representative of the communities that are served by Saint Paul Public Schools. Improvements need to be made in recruiting students and families, too.

2019 St Paul DFL School Board Candidate Questionnaire – Omar Syed

6. Mainstreaming is one of the strengths of the Special Education program. All students need to understand that each of them is unique and brings something important to the learning – or any - environment. Students learn from each other as much as they learn from teachers. Understanding difference, developing empathy, learning to see through someone else’s eyes is a very important part of the public school experience. But mainstreaming can also have its downside. If there are not enough support staff to address individual needs of students, to make sure that Individual Education Plans are implemented, the classroom will become a one-size-fits-all setting – and we know that such a setting doesn’t serve anyone. Vital to the success of the Special Education program is enough properly trained, individually and culturally sensitive staff members who work as team members with classroom teachers.
7. I believe the same things apply to the ELL program as to the Special Education Program. In both programs, the teachers and other staff need to know when pulling (any) child from the main classroom into more focused, individual programming is appropriate. Teachers need to be as flexible as we hope our students will be in their future work lives. With ELL, however, the District needs to respect the fact that speaking multiple languages is an asset in these learners – and it should be an asset for EVERY Saint Paul student to be fluent in more than one language. Perhaps an improvement we could make is to increase early learning of second languages for every Saint Paul student.
8. Everyone at school needs to understand that they have rights and obligations in the learning environment. The District needs to model the behavior it wants to see. Restorative Justice programs are a perfect way to do this. Parents need to understand what restorative justice is, how it fits into creating a positive climate, and why it builds a sense of community responsibility. School Resource Officers could play a role in this, too. The SROs have an opportunity to act as role models, if they see themselves as parts of the community and not just policing the community. They should be providing a sense of security, not a sense of fear. This will involve them working with parents as well as students. It will involve building trust between police and community members. Restorative Justice practices could help with this. Implicit bias also plays a role. Acknowledging implicit bias is a positive step toward developing a sense of shared community and restorative justice practices are an opportunity to learn about our own biases and assumptions. Too many people see a statement of implicit bias as a shaming of themselves rather than as a first step toward understanding ourselves and each other better. But school staff need to make sure that they are always questioning their own ideas for bias, and listening to others when they are told a bias is perceived. Again, restorative justice practices can help make sure that everyone feels as if they have been heard and allow them to be able to learn from mistakes that are sure to happen.
9. The school board and the superintendent need to be partners with each other as they work to build productive partnerships with teachers/staff, parents, community members and students. The superintendent is answerable to the school board and the school board is answerable to the community. So the superintendent needs to understand and feel confident that he/she is hearing the community when the school board speaks. But the superintendent brings expert knowledge to the relationship that board members will not have. The school board needs to be able to trust the knowledge that the superintendent shares. The school board needs to listen to teachers/staff, to parents, and to community members for the expert knowledge that they bring too. So the superintendent needs to trust the board, too. Both of them need to work to build

2019 St Paul DFL School Board Candidate Questionnaire – Omar Syed

trust with staff and community, keeping in mind we are all trying to do what is best for our students.

10. The budget should reflect the value of doing our absolute best by our students. It should recognize constraints, but can be a guide to us about which constraints are impeding the goal of doing the best by our students, and how we prioritize confronting those constraints. It should also be a humane document acknowledging that it is the teachers and staff who are at the front line of doing the best by our students. The board members need to understand how to read a budget and not rely solely on the superintendent to know what is included and why. Board members need to feel free to ask any and all questions about the budget until they understand what it says and what it will mean for students. We all need to understand that a budget is a guide for taking in and spending money – it is not rigid. But we also need to understand immediate constraints to avoid budget overruns as much as possible. Capital expenditures are important in order for the schools to do their best by students, but there needs to be flexibility in these expenditures if the capital plans are headed in a different direction than school enrollment, for example. We can't assume that student population will grow if we do nothing to make sure that growth happens. Adjustments of budgets cannot fall solely on the backs of staff. This kind of dynamic environment is just the sort that our students need to be prepared for in the future. The District needs to be able to model how to adjust to such changes. How do we do this? We have to try different things and see what works. Everything needs to be on the table so that we can jointly set priorities based on our shared values. Perhaps we haven't spent enough time discovering what those shared values really are.