

2019 St Paul DFL School Board Candidate Questionnaire

Steve Marchese

1. Will you abide by the DFL endorsement? Yes or No answers only

Yes

2. Please give a brief bio and describe why you are running.

I was elected to the St. Paul School Board in 2015 and currently serve as Vice-Chair. I am the son of a union truck driver and was the first in my family to go to college. I am a lawyer by training and have practiced law, worked for the University of Minnesota, overseeing the law school career development office, have provided pro bono legal services to many clients in need and now serve as the Public Service Director for the Minnesota State Bar Association. Both of my sons were educated in SPPS schools – my oldest graduated from Central High School last year and my youngest will be a junior at Central. I live with my wife and sons in the Summit-University neighborhood of St. Paul.

I am running because much still remains to be done to make SPPS a district that is meeting the needs of all of its students, in particular, students of color and indigenous students. I believe I have brought a thoughtful, strategic voice to the board which will be needed as the district implements SPPS Achieves and works to improve its financial health. I also want to be a part of continuing to improve the district's culture and the Board's governance and engagement with the community.

3. What do you see as the skills students will need to succeed as community members, in the workforce and in college readiness in the next 10 years? Where are ways in which the District can improve to help all students succeed?

Students need to have both academic knowledge and analytical skills to be effective participants in the community and in the workplace. This includes experience at the high school level with different career pathways to help them develop an understanding of expectations in the workforce. Students also need a curriculum that grounds them in the basics of literacy and math and includes access to art, music, science and social studies. Through SPPS Achieves, the district is working to improve college and career pathways through better connections with employers and internships, as well as counseling. The district also should build on current success with post-secondary enrollment options (college in schools, concurrent enrollment at colleges, etc.) to ensure that more students access them.

4. Describe three programs and/or policies of St Paul Public Schools that you believe are working/effective.

SPPS pre-K programs – the district offers excellent options that make a big difference to young learners as they prepare for elementary school. They also provide a strong enrollment on-ramp.

AVID – the program works with students in high school who may be struggling, but have the potential to succeed. Most are students of color who would be the first in their families to go to college. The teacher support and community the program provides make

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a huge difference in student outcomes with higher graduation and college enrollment rates.

Restorative practices pilots – Starting with the contract with SPFT in 2016, the district has invested resources in over a dozen buildings to begin using restorative practices as a means of improving building culture and climate. Initial results suggest that, when implemented well, restorative practices can strengthen relationships between students and between students and staff. There is a lot to learn from these pilots that can be used throughout the district.

5. Describe three programs and/or policies of St Paul Public Schools that you believe need to be improved.

Middle schools – the move to middle schools several years ago was not well-designed or implemented. As a result, outcomes have stagnated and some families choose out of district options, negatively impacting district enrollment. I am pleased this will be a focus of the SPPS Achieves plan.

Access to advanced courses – the district offers a wide-range of advanced courses, such as AP and IB. However, the enrollment in these courses does not reflect the racial diversity of the district. The district needs to broaden access to these courses so more students experience rigorous learning and provide support so they can be successful.

Culturally relevant curriculum/teaching – the district needs to review its current curricular options to include elements that speak directly to the lives of our students. Black, brown and indigenous students need to be able to see their experiences reflected in the classes they take. This includes hiring and retaining staff of color where much work has been started, but is far from complete.

6. Describe the strengths you see in the Special Education program and what improvements you believe are needed. Please include a discussion of mainstreaming in your response.

The district offers a broad range of special education options and has resources within the district (such as River East, Bridgeview/Focus Beyond, Journeys) that far exceed what is available in neighboring districts. The district also has experienced teaching and paraprofessional staff that have the capacity to meet student needs when supported. Mainstreaming has allowed more special education students to experience regular education classrooms and co-teaching, when well implemented, has the capacity to be effective for all students. I think the main issue has been providing sufficient staff support in the classroom so that this can work happen. The district faces a large shortfall in funding due to the failure of state and federal government to meet their commitments to special education students. This puts unfair pressure on staff to meet student needs with insufficient resources. At times, it also forces families and staff into contentious, as opposed to collaborative, relationships over meeting students' IEP plans.

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7. Describe the strengths you see in the English Language Learners (ELL) program and what improvements you believe are needed. Please include a discussion of mainstreaming in your response.

We need to continue to support our ELL learners with the resources we have allocated for instruction consistent with our recent SPFE contract. (This will include 15 new positions for FY 20.) In addition, we need to advocate for fully funding ELL services at the state level to eliminate the ELL cross-subsidy. The district should continue to provide a range of ELL services from co-taught programs that are embedded in comprehensive high schools and elementary schools to stand alone programs, such as LEAP High School and language academies. As with special education, co-teaching can work with support and with recognition that it may not work for every ELL student. Finally, we should be consistently re-examining how our services are adapting to meet the needs of ELL learners. The SPPS Achieves strategic has improving student outcomes and reducing disparities for ELL learners as one of its long term outcomes. The Board needs to ensure the district has the programs and resources to meet that outcome.

8. How can the St Paul Public Schools create and maintain a positive school climate/culture where all students and employees can thrive? Please include a discussion of Restorative Justice Practices, School Resource Officers and Implicit Bias in your response.

This is a huge question worthy of its own document. Some of this relates to staff - hiring and retaining staff that reflects the background of our students and providing adequate staffing to support student needs (counselors, behavioral specialists, etc.). Staff (predominantly white) also need to acknowledge their own racial and class backgrounds, as well as biases, and see their students (predominantly POCI) as capable, resilient and fully able to be successful. District culture needs to value and sustain positive relationships, using tactics, such as restorative practices, that build community and strengthen connections. The district's work over the past few years with school resource officers has clarified expectations and responsibilities, as well as made it easier for officers to develop positive connections with students. However, I do believe a longer term strategy should include decreased reliance on police officer presence (which is costly and diverts resources away from other supportive work) and increased use of other adults (whether staff or community members) that could help enforce positive behavioral norms. This whole area is part of the SPPS Achieves plan and I look forward to seeing the district's specific initiatives to address it.

9. Describe what you see as a positive working relationship between the school board and the superintendent.

The school board and superintendent should have a respectful, collaborative relationship in which there is frequent and open communication. This means the superintendent shares timely information with the board as necessary and as requested. The board sets clear expectations for the superintendent and board members regularly check in both publicly and privately to assess progress. The relationship should include a clear understanding of the differentiation in roles - school board oversight and governance, superintendent as chief administrator and implementer of policies. This also includes recognition that, in representing the community, the school board should be asking

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questions, seeking clarification and providing consistent feedback (both positive and negative).

10. A budget is a moral document that reflects our DFL and community values. What values do you believe our St Paul Public School budget should reflect and how would you exercise fiduciary responsibility of the St Paul Public Schools budget to ensure that the budget we envision is realized? Please include your proposals for exercising review of capital budget project bidding and contract process especially as it relates to current sizable overruns.

The budget should reflect the following: funding decisions aligned with programs designed to produce positive long-term outcomes; a commitment to providing both a baseline for each school to meet student needs and recognition that equitable distribution of resources demands acknowledging that different students have different needs requiring more resources for some; an understanding of the district's financial capacity so that the district remains in positive financial health; and a priority placed on meeting building needs first balanced by recognition that district-wide services are necessary to support work in buildings. Clarity and transparency are important to me and I have worked to increase them by pushing for reinstatement of the district's budget and finance advisory committee and public hearings to help explain the district's budget, as well as seek input. Much work remains in this area.

Regarding capital projects, the district's FMP plan provides an important framework for guiding how the district can improve its buildings to meet the needs of current and future students and staff. This is a critically important effort in a district that has over 70 buildings (many over 75 years old) that have suffered from years of inconsistent maintenance and neglect. Our students and staff deserve learning spaces that will support and enhance learning, as well as compete with out of district options. I will be looking to the external review process discussed by the superintendent to better understand our current operational capacity to execute on this ambitious plan, as well as ensure that the funding is stable and sustainable. I expect the scale and scope of projects to change, as with any large scale construction project, and want to ensure that the information I receive to make decisions as a board member is reliable and valid. I hold the superintendent accountable, as the chief administrative officer of the district, and expect him to provide the board with a clear outline for how the FMP will move forward in the future and the resources he and his staff will need to accomplish its goals.

Completed questionnaires must be emailed to BethCommers@gmail.com by 5 pm on Friday, June 14. Questionnaires will be put on the St Paul DFL website by Sunday, June 16 and will be made available to city convention delegates.

Also, please consider recording a 1-2 minute video clip that we will put on our FB page and link to on our website? You can post to our FB page yourself or email a link in a google drive to bethcommers@gmail.com Have fun with this!

Completed questionnaires will not be translated into additional languages. Hmong and Somali interpreters will be at the convention. You should feel free to connect with them for assistance in communicating with delegates. Delegates who need interpretation will be wearing headsets that link directly to their particular interpreter.

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