

Zuki Ellis - 2019 St Paul DFL School Board Candidate Questionnaire

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 am a St. Paul Public School graduate and parent; a special education advocate; a national home visit trainer; and the past Vice Chair and current Chair of the Board of Education.

I am focused on informed, community-centric governance: on determining what needs to be done by listening and being present at schools and in community. I am committed to building an inclusive district that lifts up all student, to center addressing racial disparities, and to ensuring students in special ed get the resources they need to succeed. As a collaborative leader, I've worked with the board to conduct a nationwide search & hire a new superintendent; shift school start times; improve, update, and create district policy; and pass the 2018 school funding referendum.

Over the next four years, I want to reshape district policy — to shift from building structure and laying foundations to specifically shaping our district's work. For example:

- Our district has a wonderful Gender Inclusion Policy, but we need to do more to ensure that it is fully implemented and that we have accountability structures in place. A rule is meaningless if we don't enforce it.
- I will work with our students on trans & non-binary inclusive sex-ed, consent ed, and comprehensive sex education.
- I've been impressed by the work student activists have been doing to encourage the district to better center Ethnic Studies. I will work with the superintendent and activists to update current policies, write new policy as needed, develop a timeline and determine the steps we need to get there, build accountability structures, and implement a program that better supports culturally relevant curriculum.

In order to get the district our students need, we have to constantly evaluate the work we've been doing, what lies ahead of us, and not be afraid to face our mistakes. We have to be constantly questioning:

- What will move student achievement? We can't do that without talking about racial disparities, and the work we're doing as a district to address and improve outcomes.
- What does it mean to have a SPPS education? We prioritize positive change through accountability, the strategic plan, and evaluation of the superintendent.
- What is true community engagement? The district should collaborate with families — engagement isn't checking a box, it's a journey together, based on trust. The district needs to be at community events and informational meetings, having a real dialogue.

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- What does it take to make our system more transparent and accessible? We need to change how difficult it is to navigate special education — families don't even know what they can be asking for.

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?*

We will need a huge emphasis on trades - not just in our district, but across the state. We have to recognize the labor shortage we are approaching, and the trades offer a path to success that can help students avoid debt. Our approach to education can't just be technology based, but based on how we solve problems, on critical thinking skills, and how we get along and work with one another. The District needs to be aligned with our partners, and work to ensure access to internships, apprenticeships, fellowships, and other opportunities for students to grow and expand their skills.

We need to be better at communication - students need to know what programs and resources are available. Not everything is offered at every school, and we need to work to ensure that all students have access to all opportunities, that a student's zip code does not limit access.

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

I love our **Graduation Attire policy**, which encourages individualized & cultural expression in graduation attire - for example, many of our Hmong students wore stoles with their name and graduation year, our American Indian students wore beautiful beaded motorboards with an eagle feather, and our students who participated in Out for Equity had rainbow tassels. Making sure that students can see themselves, be proud of their heritage, and is part of how we build a more equitable district. This important milestone in their educational journey should be celebrated not just a single class but as a community.

Currently, the district uses **Restorative Practices** as an alternative to punitive disciplinary practices at sites with high disparities. This program is a partnership with SPFE, and while it was originally grant funded, the district has taken over full funding. What this looks like is when there is harm between students, or students and staff, or a student and the community, if all parties opt in there is a restorative circle with the affected parties and their peers that works to repair relationships. The small groups work collaboratively to address what caused the harm, how to repair, and how to make amends to the people affected or the community as a whole. This is a voluntary program - people need to want to do it, this process doesn't work without everyone agreeing to participate. These are good practices, and a concrete step toward reducing discipline disparities. Taking ownership is helpful - the solution with these practices isn't to remove people,

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it's to build community and for people to feel part of it. People make different decisions when they don't want to negatively impact their community.

Last year, we passed the **Unpaid Meal Charges policy**. We created this policy so that unpaid school meal balances won't be held against students, and to eliminate stigmatization of students who are unable to pay for school meals. It ensures that all students will be provided a meal regardless of account status; that a negative balance wouldn't prevent a student from walking in their graduation; and will not demean in any way a families inability to pay. We shouldn't be creating barriers for low-income students. We need to treat them with the same dignity and respect as everyone else in the district.

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

The **Gender Inclusion policy** we passed five years ago is the strongest policy in the state. If we want it to stay that way, we need to improve accountability & enforcement, and be specific about those mechanisms in the policy itself. We need to be clear - folks who are impacted need to know they're protected, that they're included. We need to ensure that the policy is applied everywhere, that enforcement is being tracked at all facilities district wide, and that we have a plan for how to get all sites into compliance.

I feel that our **Racial Equity policy** (101.00) is something we have on the books, not something we've fully realized. It's difficult to understand what our current policy is supposed to do. It was also largely developed internally, and I think that's the wrong approach. We need to start with community conversations instead of just within the district - racial equity work needs to be grounded in community to be effective. We need a policy that is focused in on the disparities in discipline & academic outcomes.

Our **Curriculum policy** (602.01) was originally created in 1978, and says that our students' coursework should include culturally relevant curriculum. While this is in our new strategic plan, this work hasn't been fully realized. A fully realized plan to get there needs to unfold soon. We need to be intentional about our students seeing themselves in their learning. Not just in a single class, but integrated into everything they learn and their entire SPPS experience. We have the opportunity to tap into communities to help design and deliver engaging curriculum. Given our student body, we should be leading the way in this work. As I mentioned in Question 2 - I've been impressed by the work student activists have been doing to encourage the district to better center Ethnic Studies. I see that work as a crucial part of building a better curriculum policy, and I will work with the superintendent and activists to develop a timeline and determine the steps we need to get there, build accountability structures, and implement a program that better supports culturally relevant curriculum.

6. *Describe the strengths you see in the Special Education program and what*

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improvements you believe are needed. Please include a discussion of mainstreaming in your response.

Special Education is what lead me to run in the first place and I'm passionate about getting it right. These are our most vulnerable students. Advocacy needs to happen at multiple levels, we have to make sure the district is doing everything we can to follow the law and support students. We have to be accessible – it's often difficult for parents to even know what they can ask for. We have to be acting in the best interests of our students' academic success.

Last year, the district created and hired for a Special Education Assistant Superintendent position. The Department has a budget of \$100 million a year, and running it requires an understanding of compensatory structures, funding streams, state & federal mandates, student services, legal requirements, and all the complexities of special ed. I have a lot of confidence in the person we hired. Our Special Ed Advisory Committee, which is a parent committee, is amazing - they've helped change & update policy language, and they understand and struggle with the many layers of special ed and what they mean for the district. Overall, I believe the people doing the work of the department are a strength. They are dedicated and committed to figuring things out for our kids. We have good staff, but they're stretched too thin.

Funding is one of the greatest challenges faced by our Special Education Department. The cross subsidy, which refers to the state & federal government's failure to meet the special education funding targets laid out in law, is a huge structural challenge for the District. Statewide, the State of Minnesota underfunds special education by \$350 million a year. I am committed to advocating for increased education funding - I worked hard to pass the referendum last year and I will continue to help bring pressure at the legislature for the state to fulfill its commitments. The District needs to do a better job communicating about special ed funding and the impact of the cross subsidy, but still making clear the district's desire to support students regardless of funding.

We need to do a better job of communicating what resources are available to students and parents. We need to ensure the language on IEPs is always being fulfilled. I believe it would also be helpful for us as a district to go through our data and report out on 1) how soon/at what age students are being identified and placed in special education 2) who is being identified/what are the demographics of the students being placed and 3) when those services end/what age they continue to. We need to ensure that when we have students living with trauma that we aren't just giving them an EBD diagnosis instead of adequately supporting them, and also to ensure that implicit bias isn't informing who gets placed in special ed.

The intention of mainstreaming policies is good, but when the necessary supports are inadequate the outcomes often are not. The purpose of mainstreaming is to ensure that students aren't being secluded, aren't being cut off from their classmates and school activities, that they are able to have those experiences. The goal of the district is to create supportive, inclusive

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environments - to include rather than seclude. In classrooms that have adequate support staff, this can (not always, but can) work well. Classrooms without enough support staff are set up for failure. Mainstreaming can't be a success for everyone without enough support staff.

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.

The greatest strength of our MLL - Multiple Language Learners - program is our students. Many of our students are able to earn a bilingual seal for their diplomas that highlights skills students have in the languages they're fluent in. Students are able to test to earn the seal in all the languages they know. We're one of the only districts in the state that currently have that program. The last contract negotiations added ten MLL staff, which is a significant boost to the program's capacity - the board is committed to ensuring that students in the program have the resources they need.

We need to recognize what our students are capable of, and build on that. Our students don't sit in a convenient box - their needs are different. Everyone's skills and levels are individual. How are we assessing? Are our assessments accurate? How are we supporting and differentiating? We need our assessments and programs to be specific to the first language of our students - our Hmong program should be different from our Somali program.

Our staffing is a barrier to the success of our MLL students. Bilingual staff are not enough - we need more teachers & support staff who look like our students, who understand their culture and can connect through that, who speak their language, and understand where they are coming from. Our hiring practices need to reflect that, and we need to continue to work to recruit, retain, and support bilingual staff. This is a high priority for the board - students need to see themselves in all aspects of their education.

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.

To continue from the previous question: students need to see their experiences integrated into all aspects of their education - not just in a single class, but throughout their coursework, in hiring & staffing, throughout their experience with SPPS. If we say "all our students can thrive," we're talking about the academic and disciplinary disparities that our district struggles to address. We aren't setting our students up for success until they see the possibility of success, every day, in their teachers & TAs, their curriculum, and integrated into every part of their SPPS experience.

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In question 5, I talked about the restorative practices that are in place to replace punitive disciplinary practices. I believe this work is a concrete step towards reducing disciplinary disparities and building a more positive school climate. People make different decisions when they don't want to negatively impact their community.

Our current SRO contract and plan was in place before I joined the board. Student and community leaders have brought forward modifications to the plan that we've put in place. These changes have included creating a student advisory board, requiring SROs to not be in full uniform, and providing very specific training through the district on how they operate in our schools. I've voted against the SRO contract each time it has come up – I believe we need to do more to explore what all our options, to look at alternatives, and continue to discuss how we ensure that our schools are an environment where all our students and staff can thrive.

We can't delude ourselves - implicit bias in our schools cannot be neatly siloed off from the impact of implicit bias on our society as a whole. In the district, it shows up in a lot of ways: in the ways curriculum is designed and taught; in how standardized tests are designed and administered; in our discipline data, who gets suspended and who does not; in behavioral referrals; in EBD designations; in ways that make students mistrustful of adults instead of believing that these are people who want to or will help them be successful. It shows up in micro-aggressions, when adults don't recognize students' abilities to challenge themselves. Our students deserve more. If you can't believe the absolute best of every student who walks in our doors in this district, we need you to do better.

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

The overall goal of the working relationship between the superintendent and the board is to provide the best possible educational journeys for our students. Oversight is important - the superintendent needs to be accountable and responsive to the board. But it needs to be a collaborative, not antagonistic relationship. We work together to build the future of the district by advocating for funding and building partnerships that support our students; to manage the district and our funds; to improve academic outcomes; and to be accountable to the community. This work is done with a shared vision of the district. It's about all the ways in which we can support students, it's about a vision of a district where students are thriving in their schools and communities, not just academically ready, but ready for the world outside the four walls of the district, ready to be responsible, involved, ready to set the world on fire. As well, the relationship is about how we support the people who work with our kids every single day: TAs, district staff at 360, EAs, teachers, nutritionists, everyone. Everyone is interconnected, everyone plays a role, and everyone matters.

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- 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.***

In this era of inadequate state and federal education funding, building budgets that live up to all our values is extremely difficult. Sometimes, the decisions we make are based not on how we best live up to our ideals, but on what will negatively impact students the least. An example of a success we've had living up to our values through the budget is the effort to ensure a living wage for all our district employees. As of June 2019, all new hires will start at \$15/hr and every current employee of the district will be making \$15/hr. The board is also responsible for keeping the district fiscally stable – we've been able to return to balanced budgets, but that has been a very difficult process. We have twenty-six union bargaining units in our district. Before we started negotiating contracts, we worked to set the percent increase for all units, so that we were not doing different percentages for different units.

The current facility updates are the largest remodeling project that the district has ever undertaken. As I've visited sites across the district, I've seen many projects that haven't been on their timeline. We are reassessing upcoming projects in light of current difficulties. I am committed to making sure that we have procedures in place, accountability, and that I am clearly communicating updates to the community as soon as I am able.

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.