

2011 Election Disability Issues Survey
For School Board Candidates

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1. Describe your personal experience and involvement with students with disabilities?

I'm not really comfortable with using close family friendships to curry favor with constituent groups. I share this only because it profoundly expanded my understanding of the roles and responsibilities of public schools. My daughter's godmother gave birth to a daughter with (in laymen's terms) "tri-chromosomal birth defect". Nora was not expected to live, barely surviving the birth itself. At 13, she is now the oldest living person with this genetic condition, and she has attended School 29 since pre-school. Her parents believe that despite the enormous difficulties her condition presents, Nora represents God's blessings in their lives.

I, myself, live on the autistic spectrum, with Asperger's Syndrome, and don't consider it a disability. I just have difficulty understanding the "neuro-typical" person because I don't read body language well! Disabilities come in all manner of form and degree. Some forms and degrees require the attention and accommodation of others, and the "others" in this case, have an obligation to be responsive.

2. What is your view of public education's purpose for students with disabilities?

Public education's purpose is to educate all students, with or without disabilities. Its role is to help students reach their full potential as responsible, productive, self-actualized citizens.

3. Have you developed, implemented or monitored any school policies affecting students with disabilities in the last five years? If yes, please describe.

Yes. During Jean-Claude's tenure as superintendent, he identified a great many problems with the Special Education delivery system, including potential violations of IDEA. As a sitting School Board member, I have supported his efforts to address these problems and have supported the administration's recommendations to bring our policies into compliance. I continue to be somewhat disappointed in the way the administration addresses Special Education placement, and I believe that "least restrictive environment" means that parents should be able to receive services at a school of their own choice

except in the rare instance where economies of scale dictate consolidation of specialties (for example, deaf/hard-of-hearing students who rely upon sign language interpreters).

4. What will your top five objectives for students with disabilities, if elected to the school board?

Top five, huh?! First, that we meet their physical needs. Second, that we minimize stigma and eliminate the negative emotional impact that comes with teasing, bullying, etc.. Third, that students with disabilities reach their full academic potential, including graduation.

5. What is your understanding of the individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)? How will you utilize it to address issues that affect students with disabilities?

I see the IDEA as something of a Bill of Rights. Just as I see the Parent Involvement Policy as a Parent's Bill of Rights, I see parents as being empowered to demand accommodation to the student's disability so that the student's learning is fully supported.

6. Do you have any specific changes pertaining to accommodations for students with disabilities that you want to make in school district policies, programs, or the various school curricula being offered? If so, what changes do you want to make and why?

Yes, in the area of student placement (see answer to question #3).

7. Although the average student with a disability does the same work as their nondisabled peers, many students with disabilities discover that they have received an "IEP diploma" at graduation. Often, they do not learn this until they try to enroll in college and find that their diploma is useless. Will you take steps to end this practice? What steps will you take to do this?

Yes, I will take steps to end this practice. This questionnaire is the first I've heard of this problem, however, so I believe I need a better understanding of how this could occur. After all, if a student has passed the necessary Regents Exams and completed the requisite number of credit hours, how could this practice occur? Having an IEP does not mean a student hasn't met the state standards for graduation with a Regents diploma.

8. Rochester has a large Deaf community, and many Deaf students are mainstreamed in Rochester public schools. Unfortunately, these students must rely on interpreters whose performance is substandard, causing the student to misunderstand important points in their teacher's instructions and presentations. Will you work to ensure that students who are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deaf-Blind receive quality interpreters? How will you go about this?

Yes. With the National Technical Institution for the Deaf (NTID) just down the road at RIT, it seems to me that interpreters could be certified as competent by NTID staff. As important, I think, is to ensure a learning environment that encourages the deaf student to

ask clarifying questions – and get answers - at the time of instruction. This means the student must be proactive, feel free (from stigma) to ask, and the interpreter must be an advocate for the student.

9. Will you look into ways of expanding ASL programs in Rochester public schools, including hiring Deaf teachers? How will you go about this?

Yes. Again, NTID is a great resource, as is the Rochester School for the Deaf (if we are willing to poach teachers from them!), for potential teachers.

10. Many schools in the Rochester City School District are about to undergo dramatic physical improvements. There is a concern that a limited number of buildings will be renovated with accessible features (ramps, wider doorways, elevators, etc.), thus limiting the schools students with disabilities can attend in the district.

What will you do to make sure students with disabilities are fully integrated and will not be “warehoused” into a limited number of schools?

See again, my answer to #3. I believe that the Parent Preference/Managed Choice policy already has the authority to communicate ADA accessibility requirements into our Facilities Modernization Plan. I expect all 13 of the Phase I schools should include accessibility features. As Phases II and III roll out (IF Phases II and III roll out), all of the schools that continue to serve as schools (are not given back to the city) should be handicap accessible for the greatest number of students. From another angle, our schools need to be accessible because they are public buildings, often serving as gathering places for the community, and as polling places for voters. I will pay close attention to this aspect of the Facilities Modernization Plan as it unfolds.