

**Written Responses to CSEL AISD Trustee Candidate Questions from:  
Ofelia Maldonado-Zapata 09/30/20**

**1. What is one specific thing you would like to do differently to improve, create, build and maintain community trust and partnership with diverse families whose children receive special education services?**

**I would work directly with parents, community members, and teachers to create a collective plan for implementing an inclusion model. This is a necessary, but challenging, change to the way the entire district operates, and doing it successfully means that we're going to have to do it together and integrate the voices of these stakeholders that have been ignored. Parents and guardians are the best authority on what their students need to succeed, and we need to listen to their wisdom. Teachers need training and extra support to continue doing their extraordinary work, especially in these challenging circumstances. But instead of treating them as the resources they are, the district ignores them and keeps them in the dark. We need to rebuild the relationship with parents and teachers by first rebuilding the respect with which we treat them.**

**2. What is your definition of meaningful inclusion of children of all abilities including those with intellectual disabilities and those working on prerequisite skills and what are the benefits of including those students?**

**Meaningful inclusion means first identifying and acknowledging each student's strength, because each student has a gift no matter their abilities. We then need to connect that talent to their instruction alongside their general education peers, because meaningful inclusion also means building students' self-esteem and social skills**

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**alongside academic skills. Giving special education students the time, attention, and recognition needed to foster their potential will make them more confident, more invested in school, and will help them pursue their dreams after graduation. Inclusive education benefits general education students, too. Being around their peers**

**with special needs removes societal barriers that marginalize people with disabilities. Our general education students can become so much more patient and empathetic by being in a more diverse classroom, and that kind of learning is just as important for whole-child development as academics are.**

**3. Do you believe children working on prerequisite skills and those multiple grade levels behind their peers can be included and educated in the general education classroom? How could this be accomplished?**

**4. Why should the district properly fund an inclusion model to include co-teaching and providing resources to properly modify, adapt, and accommodate all learners including those working on prerequisite skills and multiple grade levels behind their peers? How can this funding be justified and accomplished?**

**The district should properly fund an inclusion model to ensure that all students are challenged to reach their highest potential. An inclusion model provides the holistic approach to education that our kids need to develop into independent, confident, and empathetic young adults who leave our schools prepared to succeed in the world around them. The funding for this model is justified by its results. If we can achieve better academic, social, and emotional outcomes for our students, and a more supportive environment to help our teachers be their best,**  
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**the funding will be more than earned. The district has already set aside \$10.5 million to implement an inclusion model, but ongoing funding to sustain that model will require community investment in the practice. By “investment,” I don’t mean asking businesses for a one-time check that’s just a tax write-off to them. I mean fostering a true community of learners where everyone wants their home school to succeed and is willing to invest not just monetarily, but in mentorship, advocacy, and programs that create a relational culture for students to feel a sense of community outside the classroom.**

**5. What are your views on segregated placements like Life Skills, Social Behavioral Skills (SBS), Social Communication Resources and Services (SCORES), and Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) and the need to potentially, remove a child from the general education setting and/or their home school and community to be placed in these units?**

**This question should be addressed on a case by case basis. Some students with more severe disabilities may need extra help outside of their integrated classrooms, and they should get it. These placements should supplement, not replace, an inclusive learning environment. But, evaluating needs on a case by case basis requires investing in special education so that we have the staff resources to ensure every student has a full spectrum of individualized support.**

**6. How do segregated placements affect the ability of students to benefit from SEL and other programs with their peers?**

**Segregated placements prevent students from having the academic and social experiences that help their holistic development. Keeping Pg 4 OMZ/AISD/D2 continued**

**special education students separate from their peers only enforces the stigmas that special education students are less competent and capable than general education students. Those stigmas make students feel isolated and hurt their self-esteem, which can also affect their learning outcomes. Segregated placements also prevent general education students from having a diverse classroom experience that teaches them to interact with peers who are different from them.**

**7. AISD has long given tremendous amounts of discretion to principals with vastly different levels of knowledge about disabilities, or none, to make decisions about the education and inclusion of students at their campuses. This has resulted in vast differences in the treatment of students with disabilities across AISD. This “local control” has forced parents to wage individual battles for services and inclusion on a campus by campus and one student at a time basis. How will you**

**address the fact that local control hinders students with disabilities and leads to inequities across the district?**

**There needs to be a standardized training on special education, ableism, and disabilities that is developed through the Equity Office and is required for all levels of school administration. A primary focus of this training should be respect—not only for students with disabilities, but also for their parents and for special education teachers. We also need to remove area superintendents from the principal hiring process. I have seen firsthand how valuable community input in candidate selection can be tossed aside at an area superintendent’s discretion. Removing them from the equation will help us keep principal selection transparent, and ensure that our pg 5 OMZ/AISD D2 continuedparents and community are able to help select the best principal for the job.**

**8. There is overrepresentation in disciplinary removals of students with disabilities and a great deal of intersection between disability and ethnicity, with Latino and black boys being vastly overrepresented in disciplinary removals. How will you ensure that policies are in place and monitored across the district to ensure equity and reduce the numbers of disciplinary removals for students with disabilities and students of color?**

**Resolving disciplinary inequity requires making changes at many levels of leadership. Administration needs to create and implement policy that trains all campus leaders and staff on how to recognize and address the root cause of behavioral issues. This holistic approach treats behavior proactively instead of reactively and will help us to identify what aid a student might need, whether it’s mental health counseling or housing security. We also need to invest in culturally competent, equity-minded resources on campus to deal with disciplinary needs beyond SROs. We need available mental health counseling, physical health screening, and parent support to intervene with help and avoid suspension, or worse, expulsion.**

**9. What do you see as the role of the district's Equity Office and its evolving Equity Plan and Special Education?**

**The Equity Office has the potential to play an invaluable role in fundamentally reshaping our district into one that truly serves all students. The evolving equity plan is a great start, but special education seems to be an afterthought. The plan must address special education more thoroughly, including the intersections of race Pg 6 OMZ/AISD/D2 continued and class within our special education population. Special education teachers were not specifically engaged for the first draft of the report, and need to be surveyed going forward for their unique input on every board priority in the plan. The plan's strategy to hire more culturally competent evaluators and special education teachers is a necessary step, but it also needs to include comprehensive training on disabilities, ableism, and special education for all school administration and staff.**