



Austin ISD School Board Trustee Candidate Written Response Questions: Piper Stege Nelson

**Please write your response to each question below and submit by
Wednesday September 30, 2020**

Written Response Questions

- 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?**

As an educated, native English speaker, I have had trouble understanding the various opportunities for families accessing special education services in the district. For example, the AISD special education website says nothing about SCORES, Life Skills, or any of the other special education programs operating within the district. And if I have difficulty accessing information just to learn more, imagine how difficult it would be to find the resources if English is not your first language, or if you are not digitally literate or have access to technology. It is imperative that we improve our systems of communication with diverse families, those receiving special education services and those that are not, at both the district level and at the school community level. This includes expanding how information is shared - on the website, in flyers, by email, on the radio - and the languages in which it is shared. Families must not only feel comfortable accessing the help that their kids need, but they must also be able to understand the system, be a part of an ARD meeting, understand the various options, read the IEP, and more. Expanding the means and the languages by which this information is shared with families will not only improve understanding on both sides, it will also build trust and ensure that everyone is working together towards the shared goal of helping this student succeed.

- 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?**

We have heard it said that special education is not a place. Yet, so often, children accessing special education services are relegated to some dark room in a random hallway. This is not inclusion. While providing additional or curated support to students outside the classroom may be an important part of a path to success for a student with special abilities, students of all abilities should/could/can be included in classrooms together for numerous reasons. In addition to advancing civil rights and creating additional parental engagement in the classroom, integrating students into the same classroom provides an incredible opportunity for students of all abilities to learn from each other. It also encourages teachers to utilize a broader array of teaching methods and to truly consider the unique learning needs of every child.

- 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?**

Integrating students who are multiple grade levels behind can be accomplished through support and training. For the students with special abilities, learning alongside their peers is imperative because students often learn just as much from peers as from teachers, and because building peer relationships is so important to their social emotional development. But learning with students their age also encourages the students with special abilities to remain in school, reduces their anxiety and discourages them from dropping out of school. The problem so often is that the general education classroom teachers do not receive the support, the encouragement and the training to include special abilities students in their classrooms; this needs to change. Students accessing special education can be included in general education classrooms, particularly if they have the individualized support they - and teachers - need to support their success. And teachers deserve to learn more about how to teach students of all abilities in one classroom because when they do they will see how incredible integration can be.

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?

This type of inclusion model can be justified in numerous ways, including that it is imperative to achieving the full success of every student - special abilities students and general learning students. From parents across the district I have heard the dismay and distrust they feel about the AISD special education program. Parents with kids with special abilities say that it took months to get an assessment, more months to get an IEP, that ARD meetings are confusing, that parents are not always welcomed in the school as advocates, and/or that their child has been transferred or, worse, demoralized by AISD. Teachers in the special education program talk about their large caseloads, the difficulty getting assessments, the multiple reassignments they receive, repeatedly taking them away from kids who need them.

It is imperative that we do a special education audit of AISD. This audit must include climate surveys from parents and staff, as well as exit interviews from the many special education teachers that have left AISD in recent years. Ideally this audit would show us where there are redundancies and problematic administrative overhead, which we could then turn into funding for an inclusion model.

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?

It may make sense to create specialized programs that cater to the needs of individual students; these specialized programs might allow for best practices treatment of kids and standardized training for teachers in the programs. That said, students should not have to leave their schools to access these programs. Busing a child - and particularly a special abilities child that may have already experienced trauma by the school system - is not always fair or right for the child, or their family. Leaving a home school can be particularly difficult for a student and family if there are siblings, friends, or important teachers that remain at the home school. Leaving their community school can not only be traumatic, but frequently leads to lower engagement by the student in their classes and by the parents in their school community. If our overarching goal is to integrate special abilities children into general learning classrooms, then that should be done in the child's home school whenever possible. Transporting a child away from their home school should be an option of last resort.

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

While this is an area where I could certainly learn more, my presumption is that social emotional learning is best implemented with a peer group. If students are made to feel other, that will negatively impact their learning - whether it is social emotional learning or just how to do long division.

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?

The idea of providing autonomy to principals is great; local control means that the principal can adjust the special education program at their school - and, in fact, all programs at their school - to fit the specific needs of the community. And sometimes that happens; the principal may be able to use PTA funds to hire another full-time reading specialist, or to engage a special education advocate who speaks a language predominant in the community, or retrofit the music classroom so that kids of all abilities can enter and learn.

But that is not always the case. Oftentimes local autonomy means that some schools get great community-driven programs, services and decisions - and others do not. Specifically, if there is a principal that is not well educated about the opportunities associated with special abilities students, they might see the special education needs as nuisances or problems, rather than opportunities.

To that end, the district should continue to allow for local control - but must also put in place basic tenets of special education services that every school must offer. These basics may include ensuring that every student receives an assessment within 2 weeks, that every general learning teacher be trained in working with kids with special abilities, and that transferring kids to another school is generally frowned upon.

But before local administrators are given full local control, the basic tenets must first be met.

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?

I recently learned that over 40% of people currently incarcerated have learning differences. issue. And in AISD the disparities in disciplinary measures taken with Black and Brown children versus White children is enormous – enough that multiple entities have done studies and have indicated that our schools are very much part of the school to prison pipeline. As part of the historical racism inherent in our education system, disciplinary actions must be taken into account when measuring the "success" of a school; when racial disparities in discipline actions decrease, the school may be on the right track. In fact, a decrease in disciplinary measures overall may be an indicator of school improvement. We need to look at the data about discipline and disaggregate it by school, by race, and by ability.

In addition, the district simply needs to get rid of the behavioral units within the special education program.

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

Equity is about distributing resources based on the needs of the recipients. As Dr. Hawley and the Equity Office are doing their good work, creating plans around equity, it should most certainly include people of special abilities. We do need an external equity audit for the district, and we most certainly need

additional training for Trustees and senior leadership around equity. I think that the Equity Office can also be tasked with creating a dashboard that transparently shows disciplinary actions, student achievements, teacher retention, and even community engagement metrics, broken down by race, by school, and by ability.

Commitment Questions, if no, please explain

1. Will you commit to making special education students everyone's responsibility to educate, including general education teachers, administrators, and central leadership and not just special education staff? Will you commit to providing meaningful education on inclusion for special education students and on disabilities and behavioral support training to all AISD staff?

YES!

2. Are you committed to funding training in best practices for students with disabilities and not training primarily focused on the district's compliance?

YES!

3. Will you commit to ensure that the district studies whether access to segregated units leads to better outcomes for students?

YES!

4. Are you committed to supporting legislative action to reform and increase special education funding in Texas?

YES!

5. How do you commit to educating yourself about our disability community and how will you advocate to combat ableism in AISD?

In preparing to take this seat on the AISD Board of Trustees, I have spoken with multiple parents, teachers, staff and community members expressing great concerns around the way that the special education program in AISD is currently run. I will continue to solicit feedback, to listen - and will do so in part by creating an informal advisory group that I will call on to guide me.

6. Are you committed to including in the Superintendent Scorecard metrics around disability to include literacy levels, outcomes such as post-secondary program participation, meaningful employment, and independence, amount of legal expenditures, family satisfaction, inclusion time by PIEMS code, and disciplinary measures for students receiving special education?

YES!

7. Will you commit to a third-party audit of special education in AISD?

YES!

8. Will you commit to a third-party survey to include teachers/staff and also families of children receiving special education?

YES!

9. As you committed to increasing transparency with respect to special education expenditures (publicly sharing information on the budget with respect to special education income and expenditures, including how much is spent on attorney's fees, mediation, due process, litigation, how much is recovered from software that bills Medicaid)?

YES!

10. Will you commit to pushing for the improvement of the working environment for special education educators to include increasing pay for Teaching Assistants, providing teachers with dedicated case management time and manageable caseloads, and improving communications between the special education administration and special education staff?

YES!

11. Will you commit to improving communications with and support of families of students receiving special education by working on reinstating the Special Education Parent Support Specialist and related programs, strengthening the SEAC and ensuring that it has a role in providing guidance to

the Superintendent and board, and pushing for honest/open/transparent communications from the district?

YES!