

Arlington Special Education PTA – SEPTA Questionnaire (10 questions)

27MAR2024 - <https://www.arlingtonsepta.org/school-board-candidates-respond-to-septa-questionnaire-2/>

Responses from Larry Fishtahler

Q1. Describe your experience working with or on behalf of children with disabilities. How will this experience impact your work on the School Board?

- **Parent:** My daughter, my wife, Elva Verastegui (a Yorktown teacher), and I went through the identification process, and the development and annual review of an IEP for her during grades 3, 4, and 5. Essentially the issue was developmental delay in reading – during most of her early years her first language was Spanish. She received additional instructional support via “pull-out” sessions with a language arts teacher brought in to help her and several other students with similar needs. This was successful; when she reached middle school a re-evaluation found that she no longer needed additional support to be successful. The only negative result – she, now a grown adult (graduate of W&M, employed as an ecologist by NPS), still remembers not liking being “pulled-out.”
- **Teacher:** Having Special Education course work at GMU beyond my certification as a secondary teacher (math) I was granted a Provisional Special Education License (VA) and spent a year as a special education teacher at Edison High School (Fairfax). During that year I taught self-contained, and co-taught Math classes, monitored my case carrier set of students, and wrote and conducted IEP yearly reviews. This included a very interesting case in which a student had been placed in a self-contained Algebra 2 class inappropriately – this student’s study of math was actually exceptionally good. His “disability” was with his performance in reading. He moved to an intensified math class and succeeded there. Before COVID I taught several co-taught special ed math classes. Since COVID I have taught the following:
 - The first Quarter 2022-23 “co-taught” Earth Science at W-L (quotes because I was the content area lead teacher, but the “assigned” special ed co-teacher never showed up – that teacher was out on medical leave. This is my prime example of the difference between “what is on the books” – representations visible in the central administration’s reporting – and what actually shows up in the classroom). This assignment also included teaching Physics for EL students The second Semester AY 2022-23 at Wakefield teaching Earth Science self-contained and a support with one co-taught class. I came in at the request of a fully licensed (special ed & Science) veteran teacher who, exhausted by post-COVID workload and stress retired at the end of the first semester. This was a very challenging assignment, in part because this course is the other course in which students can earn the science “verified credit” they need for a standard diploma. It is also important for certain reporting requirements for the school – the results were regarded as generally successful. For me personally it was joyful to see how happy students (and parents) were with their success. But it was only possible through the amazing help and support from my colleagues in the Science and

Special Ed departments. (There are other aspects to this story I can relate given further interest by SEPTA, including my problem with the Science Monitoring Report to the School Board on February 22.)

- The first semester AY 2023-24 at Wakefield (long-term sub 10/2/23 – 2/2/24) teaching Physics and Principles of Physics (co-taught). My three Physics classes included a number of students with IEP or 504 accommodations; the challenge was to provide the supports they needed in a class of 30 students. The special ed co-teacher in the Principles class is phenomenal’
 - During the fall semester at GMU I participated in EDSE 540, Characteristics of Students with Disabilities Who Access the General Curriculum, in order to relate my experience in the second Semester AC 2022-23 to the academic understanding of my students.
 - In my graduate math studies, I was not among the “smartest” – the first to come up with an answer. On one occasion my answer to a problem was correct but “unusual.” My teacher added “I like the way your mind works.” That had a startling impact on me. Now, on every appropriate occasion, and with all my students I say to them: “I like the way you are thinking about this.” We can all benefit by saying things like this to each other.
- **Advocate:** I have experience in advocating for students needs beginning with my advocacy for LULAC Council #4606 (Education focus) especially related to academic achievement, EL services, equitable access (see <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/court/us-4th-circuit/1161132.html>). During my time as co-Chair of the ACI (now “ACTL”) and President of the CCPTAs I exerted special efforts to include the voice and participation of those advocating for an equitable share of APS resources.

Q2. What do you believe to be the most significant issues or challenges within APS relating to students with disabilities?

Staffing; Training; Teacher (Case Carrier, Counselor) Time

Crucially, the time teachers (and other staff) have to work with their students is the greatest need. As it stands now all who are serving the needs of SWD are carrying loads that are too heavy and stressful. This negatively impacts how much time there is for training and collaboration.

- **Monitoring Delivery:** A School Board member needs to spend time understanding at individual school level what their needs are, and what actually happens (look beyond Central Administration’s reporting as in the case of first Quarter 2022-23 at W-L).
- **Board oversight and governance:** School Board members need to build relationships with those responsible for managing the delivery of services. From my experience with the governance of NASA development programs this requires deep penetration in understanding of what is actually going on and acting through the management structure

of the institution – at times pressing for changes in that structure. I’m running for the board, not the job of Director of Student Services.

- Comprehensive (independent) review of post-COVID reality: the 2019 Program Evaluation is documentation of the pre-COVID reality; it needs to be redone for the post-COVID reality; and it should be done by an independent entity (I would also welcome a parallel internal study – in order to compare the two results – I have experience with this sort of external review in the context of my NASA work.) There are serious issues that are quite different – one of which, attendance and reporting attendance, this is one of the challenges I confronted in my post-COVID teaching assignments.
- Research on the impact of technology: like everywhere else we need to understand the new cognitive skills and “deficits” associated with students’ use of technologies like social media, etc. on cell phones and computers (and implications specific to SWDs):
 - Student cognition generally: in some ways students seem to have more difficulties with “long form” information sources – material that requires attention for more than a few minutes. This was identified as a problem area in my EDSE 540 class. My observations of my students’ behavior are that some of them use Reddit or TikTok as a “refuge” from the stress of demanding learning exercises.
 - The good and bad: addiction to cellphones, and AI:
 - Most students have not developed enough awareness, maturity, and discipline to resist the products of highly motivated, well paid, psychologically sophisticated entities that work only to capture and hold users’ attention for the economic benefit of their sponsors. I am not an enemy of cell phones; I have had students use them productively. (Some students have more Physics on their cell phones than they have in their notes. I also have them take a picture of the day’s agenda for their own reference and to let their parents know “what you learned in Physics today.”) But what is needed is the equipment for “sequestration” of cell phones in every classroom so teachers can have students’ attention during segments of direct instruction.
 - On the other hand, AI tools may offer some benefit if employed carefully – we are just at the beginning of the investigation of how to do this (this is an example of *responding* to a challenge when it shows up – we could have and should have anticipated this). As far as is known I am the only teacher who has had school-based administration approval for the use of AI technology by students in the classroom for content area (Earth Science) learning experiences. This went well and was engaging to my self-contained students; there were some positive results (and no problems). I collaborated with the SPED reading teacher, and she observed benefits as well. There is much work to do to develop best practices – we, APS, have the talent to do this – as board members we need to make sure they have the time to work this out. This is one of the ways in which I embrace the challenge to “do things differently” – but deliberately and carefully – no “enthusiasms.”

Q3. What steps should APS take to improve the identification, education, and overall experience of students with disabilities in APS?

- Train teachers – critically in the early years – based on my mother’s experience as a highly successful kindergarten teacher (for 35+ years) specifically on this point.
- Provide teachers time –
 - reduce class size so teachers can spend enough time with each student to understand how they feel, and how they think
 - provide time for collaboration – especially with specialists and teacher mentors
- Improve identification/screening for students who come to APS from elsewhere – and with varying kinds and degrees of education.

Q4. What are two concrete ways that APS can improve inclusion of students with disabilities and implement universal design for learning?

From my experience this can be tricky. Second semester last year I taught self-contained Earth Science, the other science course with the potential for verified credit (SOL test) that leads to a standard diploma. (And has important implications for school accreditation and compliance requirements.) A good number of my students passed the SOL (it is hard to explain the joy students feel with that accomplishment – same for their parents – same for me). (“SWD” is not a category for me – it is a signal about some characteristic of one of the students I’ve had in my class – each specific one. The reality is the student – not the signal.) Those students would not have fared as well by inclusion in co-taught classes; the smaller class sizes of self-contained classes were a crucial benefit for them. Otherwise, LRE is best (and, of course, required); some of the students I had last year I met again this year in my co-taught Principles of Physics classes – some were struggling; but they were making it because the special ed teacher is phenomenal.

A second way of improving inclusion is through teacher training (and keeping class size down). There are several aspects to this. One is making sure general education teachers understand well how to make inclusion successful academically. Another is that they understand how to create a classroom culture of respect and acceptance of all kinds of differences, so everyone is welcomed and included equally by classmates. (The COVID outage did serious damage to students’ concept of working together as a class.) This is essential to teachers’ defeating some students feeling “I am less than ...” or “I’m no good at ...” (so familiar to math teachers). Teachers need to be skilled at defeating defeatism. Teachers should also focus students’ attention on organization and the development of their “executive mental processes” – something we should all do – but is especially useful to some SWD students.

I am basing this response on my experience of post-COVID realities in two high schools – I fully realize how limited that is: dwarfed by the scope of this question (humbling like other of your questions). I don’t pretend to offer answers to things I don’t know. It in this regard that my experience as a systems engineer working on NASA development programs comes into play – I learned from my father: “If you are good at your job, you will be given additional responsibilities

up to the level at which they include things beyond your own expertise – then you need to know how to work with the expertise of others.” I took that observation to heart – it is the basis of the successes of my engineering career, and my view and appreciation of collegiality and collaboration. I have a lot to learn – I hope to have SEPTA’s help with that.

UDL: Again, I am responding from my own (limited) experience. Teachers need time to orient curriculum towards UDL (I prefer to avoid discussing theory, and rather focus on what works in our classrooms – a lesson I learned from my undergrad studies for my BS in Psychology). I have a few quibbles with the UDL summary – e.g., “abstraction” is not the same as “generalization” and is more difficult for some LD SWD; “acceptance” of a disability is an issue sometimes acute for students (high school especially), and families. In a UDL sense we all have limits, and a “disability” is always in reference to a context – the way we do schooling is a very specific context. In this sense UDL seeks to provide more “openness” and better access for everyone. From my experience the main thing is to be alert to what works and what hinders the students in front of us in the classroom. My EL co-teacher and I noticed that our students had greater difficulty “reading” diagrams of things like electric motors – making connections between diagrams and text descriptions. My GMU EDSE-540 teacher said this had not been discussed in the literature and would be a good research topic. This kind of cognitive processing difficulty is familiar to those of us who teach math – the importance of relating multiple representations: formulae, tables, graphs, and text. Another consideration I would add is the use of block scheduling as it is done in some of our schools; not all students can maintain focus on a subject for 90 min. and retain “learning” over breaks of multiple days. Some of the motivation for block scheduling came from an “enthusiasm” of a former Superintendent – an enthusiasm Yorktown was able to resist.

Other arrangements should be examined – and looked at through an UDL lens.

Q5. What is your knowledge of and opinion of the accessibility issues in APS facilities and how would you remedy this?

I am not sure of the sense of “accessibility” intended in this question, or its scope. As always “make a plan, allocate resources, and monitor to make sure improvements actually show up.” – but anyone can say that. I only have direct experience of current accessibility issues from the perspective of my post-COVID teaching at Wakefield and W-L. I know there were serious accessibility issues with remote schooling during COVID, and we are still reworking material, expectations, and attitudes related to teaching and learning post-COVID (creating something new – but beyond the old or “new” normal – “normal” is a dead-end concept).

Otherwise, I’m going to need help understanding accessibility issues that are the concerns motivating this question.

Q6. How familiar are you with APS' 2019 Program Evaluation for Students with Disabilities and Those Receiving Interventions? How will you ensure that the recommendations made in this evaluation are implemented?

There are some parts I understand well because they relate to my teaching directly – pg. 199 “Staff Knowledge.” There are other parts – not so well; they are outside my direct experience. However, this document is a “status” pre-COVID; it needs to be redone – again independently. The post-COVID reality is quite different in my teaching experience. There some specific areas I would like to see more in-depth reporting on – e.g., attendance (both student and teacher/assistants), absence reporting, and use of substitutes and their qualifications.

Q7. What strategies should APS use to hire and retain sufficient high-quality and diverse Special Education teachers?

- Be more aggressive in recruiting from local universities. In my EDSE 540 class this past fall semester at GMU, everyone else in that class (including the teacher) already had some relationship with Fairfax County Public Schools. We should create innovative ways to get education students into our schools to experience the culture of collegiality we have built.
- Build a corps of “Senior Consulting Mentors” – effective teachers thinking of retiring but are willing to continue their commitment to education at a lower stress level by mentoring new and potential teachers. Fairfax does this.
- APS has built a culture of collaboration and mutual support that is far better than I have experienced in any of my teaching or engineering experience. We need to feature this in our recruiting; we need to find ways to bring in candidates to experience this themselves. They must see that we have and deliberately promote a culture of collaboration and support that is welcoming and works hard to make everyone successful – I have had direct benefit of this and know and appreciate how powerful it is to *feel* it. HR seems to be clueless about this.
- Do what is needed to convince potential teachers that they will be supported so they will not fail, be frustrated, overwhelmed, overworked, or over stressed. Convince them that our work culture of collegial support is unique, and we have dedicated support (like the Senior Consulting Mentors proposed above) that are available to help them achieve success and satisfaction.
- We have research opportunities available in creating the future of education – we are an exciting place to work (for example cognitive development of children growing up engaged with technology and using AI tools in teaching and learning).
- Feature in our recruitment efforts our diversity and its challenges – if you come to Arlington, you will be able to do something important – in line with why you chose education in the first place.

- Given the fiscal realities we will encounter in the next several years, we must make sure “penny wise” economies are not chosen that have damaging consequences for SWD and students with other kinds of challenges. We cannot buy ourselves out of this problem – we must maintain close competitiveness with surrounding jurisdictions, but feature other benefits e.g., our class sizes are not as large as others, etc.

Q8: How should APS ensure General Education teachers are adequately prepared to instruct and meet the needs of students with disabilities?

- Time: Perhaps the most important thing is to make sure gen ed teachers have time to work with colleagues who have expertise making inclusion work. And making sure gen ed teachers have time to spend time with each student – mainly by keeping class sizes reasonable.
- Develop special ed assistants and change their workload so they have time to plan with the gen ed teacher. I have worked with some special education assistants that are really good. We can do better at making their assignments focused and coordinated with their gen ed teachers.

Q9. What strategies should APS use to hire and retain sufficient high-quality and diverse related service providers (which include but are not limited to Audiologists, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Specialists, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, Speech Language Pathologists, Teachers of the Visually Impaired, ASL & Cue Interpreters, and Behavior Specialists)?

My experience in working with some of these specialists tells me that we need to ask them – ask them why they prefer some schools over others. On the other hand, I need to understand better how we evaluate their job performance and reward really good work.

Q10. How will you engage with the special education community and/or SEPTA if you are elected?

The scope of your questions is truly humbling. I know enough to have some idea of the many things I don't know. Learning from my father's observation, and incorporating that into my

carrier as a systems engineer, allowed me to successfully lead the Science Advisory Committee, the ACI, and the CCPTAs. I will apply those skills to working with SEPTA, the ASEAC, and other advocates for SWD and Title 540 students. My past experience as an advocate for students of color makes me appreciate how much work is needed to make the proverbial “difference.” We must anticipate difficulties – get out of this mode of responding to existing problems – acting proactively not in response to legal actions. SWD are a special class of students with specific mandated supports. But to me SWD is not a category – it is a reminder of some of the attributes of students I have had in my class – with whom I have endeavored to make successful in school.

I have begun to develop a collegial relationship with Kathleen. If Kathleen is elected, I will work with her to establish a warm working relationship with SEPTA. If Kathleen is not elected, I will take full responsibility for establishing that relationship directly with you (with Kathleen’s help I hope) and providing an effective path for bringing your concerns to the deliberations of the board. I believe that if we are both elected, we would be a powerful presence on the board for our SWD and Title 504 students. We are losing a lot of experience with APS among the board members. I have a long and broad record of working with others for the benefit of our students and schools. I know it’s going to take a lot of work to do the job well – I am willing and able to do that work full time. Finally, if you or anyone contacts me with any concern, you will have an initial response within 48 hours.

The best source for information about my teaching is from those for whom and with whom I have worked with – especially post-COVID.

In summary: I feel that I have said too much, and too little. I freely acknowledge that I have a limited experience and have a lot to learn – which I will do. I hope that this response gives you a sense of my involvement with the education of SWD and provides a basis for further dialog.

Thanks for the opportunity to engage.