



Questionnaire for Board of Education candidates

General Election, November 4, 2008

Candidate/Campaign Information:

Candidate name:	Rachel Norton
Office sought:	Board of Education
Contact person:	Rachel Norton
Mail address:	P.O. Box 210405, SF 94121
Telephone:	415-762-0721
Email address:	rachel@rachelnorton.com
Web address:	www.rachelnorton.com
Anticipated Budget:	\$75,000
Funds raised to date:	\$32,000
Percentage of donations under \$50:	20%

General Questions: Please write a brief response (less than 150 words) to each question. Please return this questionnaire electronically to contactus@phdemclub.org We will make these questionnaires available to our members before the endorsement meeting.

1. Why are you running? Why should we vote for you?
I'm running because I believe strongly that our school board is lacking a day-to-day connection with the schools. Currently, just two of seven board members are current public school parents, and one of them (Eric Mar) is moving on after this

year. Parents experience the assignment system first-hand; watch their children engage or struggle with the curriculum; volunteer in the classroom, on site councils and PTAs; and it is through these experiences that we gain a deep understanding of actual conditions on the ground in the schools. Because I've been involved in our schools in a variety of ways since 2002, I've got a deep understanding of the issues, and over the years I have built a reputation for being reasonable, well-informed and fair. I will be effective because I am a consensus-seeker and a team player, and I will place great importance on working collaboratively with my colleagues on the Board as well as other stakeholders.

2. What sets you apart from your opponents?

- ♣ **First, I'm a candidate with skin in the game because I am a public school parent. I understand the conditions on the ground in our schools because I've put in the time as a parent volunteer, a site council officer and a leader at the district level through my long involvement with Parents for Public Schools and the Community Advisory Committee for Special Education.**
- ♣ **Second, I'm a parent of a child with a disability and an expert on the issues related to special education. Ten percent of the children in the district have IEPs and 30 percent of the district's budget is spent on special education; teachers, parents and disability advocates are very dissatisfied with our current programs; we spend too much on lawsuits and not enough on following the law. We desperately need new engagement by the school board in this area.**
- ♣ **Third, I have been fortunate and honored to receive broad support from all sides of the political spectrum. I started this race as a parent advocate who was not well known, but opinion leaders and a number of elected officials have seen that I am a fair, well-informed candidate who is committed to listening to all sides and making decisions that move our schools, and not a particular agenda, forward.**

3. What are the top three issues facing San Francisco's schools? What will you do about those issues?

My overarching priority will always be to ensure the best academic outcomes for the largest number of students in San Francisco schools – to close the achievement gap, to increase the graduation rate and to keep students engaged, learning and in school.

To accomplish these goals, I will work tirelessly to address:

- ♣ **The lack of funding and resources for public education in our state and our nation;**
- ♣ **Trust, accountability and communication issues between the school district and its partners (parents, teachers and the broader community in San Francisco). These issues are pervasive and they must be addressed if we are to move forward.**

4. Would you describe yourself as fiscally responsible? Please give an example to support your answer.

Being fiscally responsible as a member of a School Board is not a choice, but a necessity. Failing to balance the district's budget can lead to a loss of local control over schools. I am committed to making the sometimes excruciating choices that come along with fiscal responsibility.

For example, this past spring we learned that the schools were facing devastating budget cuts, and the Superintendent proposed using all of our Prop H. "third-third" funds for operating expenses rather than the priorities identified by the Prop H Community Advisory Committee. While some advocates opposed this move, I supported it, because it allowed us to rescind some teacher layoffs.

5. Would you describe yourself as socially progressive? Please give an example to support your answer.

I am also committed to progressive values of equity and social justice. I know we are serving some children better than others in this district, and I am committed to addressing this disparity and bringing all of our students up to a higher level of achievement. In my work for the CAC for Special Education, I have consistently advocated on behalf of low-income and non-English speaking families who have traditionally been ill-served by our special education programs.

Issue Questions:

1. Given the very real probability of reduced state funding for SF schools in the coming years, what combination of budget cuts and tax increases would you suggest to address budgetary shortfalls?

Cuts, if absolutely unavoidable, must always be made as far from the classroom as possible, because the welfare and achievement of students will be my first priority as a Commissioner. It is difficult to imagine the state expecting us to cut back more than we already have, but if the worst case budget scenarios come to pass, all the other things that society now expects schools to do would have to come second to supporting the best possible academic outcomes.

The Superintendent has in the past floated the idea of legal action against the State of California on the grounds that it has failed to adequately fund schools at the level required by law. I would wholeheartedly support such an effort if our schools continue to be used as the bait in games of budgetary chicken, like we saw this year.

2. Absent radical changes, state and federal mandates (like 8th grade algebra and No Child Left Behind) have laid out difficult goals for our schools to meet. What steps do you think the SF schools should take to meet those achievement goals?

My quarrel with NCLB is not the high standards it sets, but the fact that it is an unfunded mandate and that it relies too much on testing as an indicator of program quality and achievement. The district's "Beyond the Talk" strategic plan lays out some bold, new ideas, but the hard work is yet to be done. My role as a Commissioner will be to:

- a. **Put increasing student achievement first by implementing the Board's resolution to bring 60% of all racial groups to proficiency on state Math and English tests;**
- b. **Support the Superintendent in implementing the strategic plan and provide leadership to encourage all stakeholders to do the hard work necessary to make the strategic plan successful;**
- c. **Closely monitor our progress toward the goals defined in the strategic plan, to be sure we're staying on track.**

3. While SF's dropout rate of 21% is not as bad as the state average of 24%, it is far from ideal. How should the SF schools improve enrollment, recruitment, and retention?
Students at risk for dropping out need mentoring, support and a way to reconnect with the importance of school in their lives. We need to find a way to increase the number of counselors, re-tool the curriculum to make it more meaningful to today's youth, and develop a "re-entry" plan for students who are chronically truant. At the same time, we need to make the case to prospective families that there is a great education to be had in San Francisco public schools, in order to recruit more students and reverse the trend of declining enrollment. To do this, we must recommit ourselves to being transparent and responsive to prospective families, offering them an assignment process that is easier to navigate, doing a better job communicating our successes and honestly acknowledging areas where we need to work harder.

4. How should the SF schools address the achievement gaps correlated with race, class, and special needs students? How should we address the long-standing gaps between East side and West side schools?

The Superintendent's new plan, "Beyond the Talk," utilizes a tool called the Balanced Scorecard to generate and monitor a number of indicators of progress on creating joyful learning communities and higher achievement for students. I am cautiously optimistic about this plan, but I believe the hard work is yet to be defined. The next Board will need to provide strong leadership and support for implementing this plan, because I suspect that this work will not be easy or comfortable for anyone. The Board must also closely monitor the implementation of this plan, to be sure we make progress and stay on track with our broad policy objectives.

5. How should the SF school assignment process work, given our goals of race and class diversity (and our current shortcomings in that area), the difficulties parents have dealing with a complex system, and questions of constitutionality arising from the recent Supreme Court decision?

My family benefited from the choice system -- we looked at a number of schools, chose several that worked great for all of us, and received our second choice. However, I have come to see that the current system is far too complex and uncertain for families to be workable any longer. I feel hopeful this year that we are finally ready to move ahead with a broad compromise on student assignment, and I'm eager to finally resolve this issue after years of tinkering and arguing over alternatives. I am willing to consider several ideas that balance certainty, transparency and equity like neighborhood set-asides or zoned assignments.

Economically and racially-diverse schools are also very important, and we should foster them by strategically locating attractive programs and making them accessible to all families.

6. Do you support a voluntary system of Clean Elections – full public financing – of candidates for citywide offices? Would you participate in such a system if it were available?

Yes. As a citywide candidate for a down-ballot office, I will have to raise more money than the average candidate for the Board of Supervisors accepting public funding. That does not seem particularly fair to me, and it creates a system where well-connected candidates can get more attention because of their political connections rather than their contributions to the schools. So I would definitely support extending public financing to School Board, Community College and other citywide races.

7. Do you support or oppose the following propositions on the November ballot? Please explain why or why not.

- SF Declaration of Policy in support of SF public high school students participating in JROTC (Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps)

Support Oppose Reason:

I do not support the Board's decision to phase out a program that is popular and effective with the students it serves, leaving them with no replacement program. I am open to considering replacement programs where there is a concrete plan, budget and timeline, and where affected students have participated in the development of the plan. Until this happens, I support the right of students to choose JROTC as an elective. I do NOT support the district's previous practice of placing students in the program when they did not explicitly request it; nor am I convinced the program as currently offered can be used to satisfy the State's P.E. requirements.

- CA Proposition 4: Amends California Constitution to prohibit abortion for a non-emancipated minor until 48 hours after physician notifies minor's parent, legal guardian or, if parental abuse reported, an adult family member

Support Oppose Reason:

I do not support parental notification initiatives, because in many cases, a minor seeking an abortion cannot seek a family member's permission or advice due for safety or other reasons. My support of abortion rights is unequivocal.

- CA Proposition 5: Provides rehabilitation as an alternative to prison for nonviolent drug offenders

Support Oppose Reason:

I generally support rehabilitation and treatment for drug offenders over prison time. I believed it has been proven over time that treatment works far better than imprisonment in getting nonviolent drug offenders back into productive society.

- CA Proposition 6: Requires increased penalties for youths convicted of gang-related crimes, including the possibility that 14-year-olds will be tried as adults; increases spending for prison and parole operations, which would come from California's General Fund.

Support ____ Oppose Reason:

I oppose this measure because it throws money at failed prison policies and targets youth for incarceration rather than rehabilitation.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.