

Potrero Hill Democratic Club

Questionnaire for Board of Education candidates

General Election, November 4, 2008

Candidate/Campaign Information:

Candidate name:	Sandra Lee Fewer
Office sought:	Board of Education
Contact person:	Sandra Lee Fewer
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Anticipated Budget:	\$85,000
Funds raised to date:	\$45,000
Percentage of donations under \$50:	10

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?

Your members should support my candidacy because I have extensive firsthand experience working in and around public schools for over two decades. In my current position as Education Policy Director at Coleman Advocates for Youth, I study ways to improve our public schools on a daily basis.

I have been active in the public education community for many years—having served as a PTA President for 12 terms, Vice President for 10 terms, elected to 10 School Site Councils and on the Citizen’s Advisory Committee on Student Assignment, the Weighted Student Formula Committee, and the Proposition H Committee. In 2007, I served as the Chairperson for the Superintendent Selection Committee. In addition, I have worked extensively on the two recent bond campaigns for Prop. H and Prop. A.

I am running for School Board to use my experience to:

- Raise the standard of expectations to better prepare our children for college or a living wage job**
- Close the achievement gap so that the district’s lowest performers are not left behind**
- Strengthen the District’s commitment to parent engagement**
- Develop more effective principal training**

2. What sets you apart from your opponents?

The main quality that distinguishes me from other candidates is my experience at school sites, as a former SFUSD student and graduate, as an involved parent for 20 years, and for the past 7 years, as a Director of Education Policy and Parent Organizing at Coleman Advocates. None of the other candidates have as much “on the ground” experience as I do. I was a parent leader before I taught parents to be leaders in their own schools. I was the lead parent write the resolution to create a Parent Advisory Council, which is now in its fifth year of operation. I am also a 4th generation San Franciscan whose parents, grandparents, two children and husband are SFUSD graduates. My son is currently in high school. I also train over 500 parents a year how to be actively engaged in their children’s education.

Finally, I have forged strong relationships with the district staff, school staff and members on the Board of Education.

3. What are the top three issues facing San Francisco’s schools? What

will you do about those issues?

- 1. Narrowing the widening racial achievement gap**
- 2. Strengthening parent engagement in the schools**
- 3. Building stronger educational leadership at school sites**

If elected, I will support the new strategic plan that is centered on equity and is designed to create a better learning environment for all children. I have studied the plan, discussed the plan with the Superintendent, and believe that we can once and for all, narrow the widening achievement gap. I will also monitor the parent engagement strategies of the district, moving the district toward a parent engagement program that is centered on student learning. It is estimated that SFUSD will lose 50% of its current principals within the next five years. I will support stronger initiatives to look within our own ranks of teachers to train them to become successful urban principals in our district.

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

When we (parent group and I) passed the resolution to create a Parent Advisory Council, I found funding for it and it has now been fully funded by private grants for over 5 years. If elected, I will not only study the budget, but study ways that SFUSD can use their money more efficiently and effectively. Other districts in California are making great changes in their schools and they are doing it without a Rainy Day Fund and Prop. H Funds.

I am fiscally responsible because I will not approve spending without accountability to outcomes.

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

I have been working on issues such as education equity and affordable family housing with Coleman Advocates and I know the need for change in order for working families to stay here in San Francisco and lead healthy, vibrant lives. In my position as the Director of Education Policy and Parent Organizing I have organized hundreds of parents, almost 100% low and moderate income parents of color, to make change in their schools, neighborhoods and city. I have advocated for authentic parent voice and protected the right to independent student voice. I have trained hundreds of parents/guardians on how to be leaders for change at their school sites and at the District level. Many of those trained parent leaders are leading

groups in their own communities toward equity and increased parent voice in our schools.

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?

It is less a matter of cutting programs, and more a challenge of how we can more efficiently use available monies. Always, the education of our students must come first and we should use different measures to evaluate whether or not particular programs are working effectively and efficiently. We need to seriously look at Special Education as a program that needs to be evaluated for effectiveness and efficiency. Statewide we need to reinstate the vehicle-licensing fee and revisit Prop. 13.

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?

SFUSD needs to concentrate on a common vision, which I would hope would be, that every student graduates ready for a living wage job or college ready. This should be what the entire district works toward and we must align our resources toward our goal. Then, we must define those “gatekeepers” to that goal. For example, if we had this goal, 8th grade Algebra is a good thing. Algebra is one of those classes identified as a gatekeeper to students graduating with A-G requirements completed. We can look at Los Angeles where they have implemented an A-G graduation requirement and what they found was that 61% of ELL students needed to repeat Algebra. So, if you allow that extra year for students to repeat difficult courses, it allows an opportunity for more students to graduate with A-G completed coursework. It is important that we look closely at what is happening in the classroom and what is not. Then we must give support to ensure that what happens in the classroom is aligned with our common goal.

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?

The real number for dropouts in San Francisco is higher than the quoted rate of 21% and that is because we have a huge “push out” factor in San Francisco. Many of our high schoolers and increasingly more middle schoolers, are assigned to County schools where SFUSD is not required to collect the same data as it does for the San Francisco Unified Schools. Therefore we see a large number of students being “pushed out” to those schools when they are truant or severely underperforming. So, the first thing we need to do is get accurate data.

SFUSD needs to remedy situations that prevent students from attending school. We have not redesigned our transportation system for over 30 years. We must look at how we are teaching. The students of today are not learning information in the same way students were learning 20, even 10 years ago. Everything is at a faster pace and students need engaging curriculum. The textbook has become the curriculum and with that we have seen our racial achievement gap widen.

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?

SFUSD first must have the will and direction to address the inequity within our public school system. We must look at policies that directly adversely affect the achievement specifically of African American, Latino and Pacific Islander students because those are the racial groups that are being left behind. That means we must look at programs and policies such as Special Education, our discipline policies and the severe academic tracking in our schools, through the lens of equity and then we must be willing to do something about it. The achievement gap exists in every public school in San Francisco. There is a racial achievement gap at Westside schools too. In fact, the gap is widest at some of these schools. Special education needs to be completely restructured.

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?

The school assignment process must be revamped because our enrollment process presents exceptional hardship on low income, non-English speaking families. In order to fully participate a parent/guardian must visit at least 7 schools during the end of October to the end of December, with schools not in session for Thanksgiving and the winter break. The school tours are during the day, siblings are not allowed and the tours are only in English. This makes it impossible for low-income parents to fully participate. Coupled with the fact that our schools are becoming rapidly more racially segregated is cause to look at school assignment once again, and hopefully get it right. San Francisco is in a unique position because we have tried other indicators (diversity index) other than race and it has not worked. In the recent Supreme Court decision, Justice Kennedy did not say that race could not be used, just that race should not play a prominent role in assigning students.

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. Pubic financing allows people of all incomes to actively pursue office and enable them to compete fairly. If I were to run again, I would participate in it. It would allow candidates to concentrate on the real issues of campaigns instead of fundraising. It would also give constituents a chance to participate with the same status level.

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 X Reason: **I am voting against this measure because the San Francisco Board of Education has already made its decision and I believe that we can create a better program for the students. Also, this measure is only symbolic, as the city has no jurisdiction over school board matters. This is an issue that has divided people long enough. It is time to move on and create a better program and tackle the real issue of student learning.**

- 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: **Every woman should have the right to privacy over her own body. The decision to seek an abortion should be the right of the person terminating the pregnancy. This is the first step toward the movement to put restrictions on abortions in California, and we must not let that happen.**

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

Support Oppose ____ Reason: **Our prisons are overflowing and Rehabilitation should be the ultimate goal for nonviolent drug offenders.**

- 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: **This is discriminatory and 14 year olds are unable to make rational judgments. Our society recognizes this when we do not allow 14 year olds to drive, purchase cigarettes and alcohol, and vote until they are a certain age. Yet, when it comes to criminal issues, we turn a blind eye to the immaturity of a 14 year old and want to try him/her as an adult. Most often these youth are victims of violence themselves. The answer is not to further institutionalize Youth, but to rehabilitate them back into society. It makes for a safer society and is more long term fiscally responsible.**

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.