



Questionnaire for candidates for the office of
Member, San Francisco Board of Education
General Election, November 6, 2012

*Please return this questionnaire electronically to contact_us@phdemclub.org no later than **Tuesday, September 4**, to confirm your speaking slot at the September 11 endorsement meeting.*

Candidate name: Rachel Norton
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Please write a brief response (≤ 150 words) to each question. We will make these questionnaires available to the public before the endorsement meeting.

1. Why are you running for office?

Providing a great education for our children through our public schools is of crucial importance to families in San Francisco. My first priority as a Commissioner 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 graduation rates and to keep students engaged and in school. As a parent of two current students, one with special needs, I am pleased with our academic progress but I am not satisfied yet. We still have much more work to do in making sure all children are achieving, in monitoring the outcomes of our new student assignment system, in managing our challenging budget situation, and holding our new leadership team accountable for meeting our strategic plan goals.

2. What are your qualifications for this position? If you are an incumbent, describe your major accomplishments while in office.

- Authored legislation that created a joint committee with the City College Board of Trustees; also the “Feeding Every Hungry Child” policy to make sure no child is turned away from receiving a hot lunch regardless of ability to pay; and crafted important wording in the student assignment policy ensuring that the individual needs of students in special education are considered in our student placement process.
- Maintained a blog on my school board work at www.rachelnorton.com; I recap every board meeting (usually the same night as the meeting) and engage constituents around issues facing the school district. My communication efforts have helped parents and other City residents understand what is happening day-to-day in the district, and added another important communications channel between constituents and the school district.
- Spearheaded efforts to transform our programs and services for students with disabilities; we conducted a top-to-bottom audit of these programs and services in 2010 and have embarked on an ambitious redesign. I am most proud of the fact that students with disabilities can now be fully included at ANY school in the district – not the case four years ago.

3. What are the top three challenges facing public education in San Francisco? If elected, what will you do to meet these challenges? Both my daughters will enter high school in the next few years, and I want to be sure there are challenging, engaging programs that will help support them and encourage them to reach their dreams. I want the best academic outcomes for every child; I want to continue to monitor the outcomes of our redesigned student assignment system and ongoing work to transform special education to be sure those efforts are on track; I want to support our new Superintendent and leadership team in meeting our strategic plan goals of Access and Equity, Student Achievement and Accountability; finally, I want to work to improve our student nutrition programs so that we can be serving fresh, quality foods to students. This will take new engagement from the district and from funders, as well as leadership from the Board.

4. What are your ideas for lessening the achievement gap between students of different backgrounds?

District test scores for the 2011-12 school year were recently released, and they show we have begun to make real progress on closing the district’s racial achievement gap. Our focus must continue to be on instruction – making sure teachers are supported and given resources to differentiate curriculum for students at all levels. Also, now we know (based on our results in the nine schools that received generous School Improvement Grants from the Federal government for three years ending in June 2013) that focused investment on professional development and instruction really pay off in terms of closing that achievement gap.

5. What are your views on charter schools?

I continue to be concerned about the overall impact of charters on our educational system. I supported new applications for Gateway Middle School and a new KIPP high school because both of these charter management organizations had established constituencies and a strong track record with their existing San Francisco schools, but in both cases I voiced strong reservations about the ongoing effect these schools might have on their district-managed counterparts. I voted against Rocketship, Mission Prep, and Flex Academy because I did not believe these programs were what our district needs. In general I believe charters siphon enrollment (and therefore dollars) out of publicly-managed school systems; that some charters are guilty of “cherry-picking” students and discouraging those who may take more resources to educate; and I am skeptical of claims that charters provide a better education than what can be had in traditional public schools.

6. What further improvements would you make to the current school assignment system, in particular with regards to access to neighborhood schools?

The student assignment redesign was one of the most challenging problems I have ever worked on. While I do not think our current, redesigned system is perfect, I do not believe we will ever be able to design a “perfect” system that makes everyone happy. With the current system we are trying to better balance choice and proximity, and hoping diverse schools will follow. I do believe that if every child actually attended his or her “neighborhood” public school we would have quality schools in every neighborhood, but I do not support forcing parents to attend schools they believe do not serve their children; indeed, most parents in San Francisco do *not* currently choose their neighborhood schools as a first choice. Until every school in San Francisco is a quality school, and serves every child well, a restrictive neighborhood-only school assignment system will only advantage families in certain neighborhoods while encouraging families in other areas to find other options outside the public school system.

7. How would you address the problem of truancy?

In partnership with District Attorney Gascón, the school district has initiated a very successful program at Burton HS that is having a real effect on truancy there. The program funds additional counselors and mentoring to address the problem both from the “barriers to getting to school” end and the “how do students feel about school once they get there” end. I support expanding that program to every high school, and I am more convinced than ever that addressing the issue of student engagement is a big part of the solution to the problem of truancy. If students believe that adults at school care about them and notice when they aren’t present, they are more likely to attend school. And if they are engaged by what they are learning and feel that curriculum/classwork is relevant to their lives, they are more likely to get themselves to school.

8. Do you support or oppose the following Propositions on the November ballot? Please give your reason (≤50 words) for each position.

Proposition 30 X support oppose

Reason: We must extend the Governor’s tax initiatives to avoid devastating cuts to education and other state services.

Proposition 31 ___support X oppose

Reason: Though I like the concept of a two-year budget, this constitutional amendment goes too far.

Proposition 32 ___support X oppose

Reason: Would gut collective bargaining in the state.

Thank you for your time, and your commitment to the children of San Francisco. We look forward to seeing you on September 11th.