

**Due 9/5**

**Potrero Hill Democratic Club  
Board of Education Candidate Forum  
Tuesday, September 13, 2022  
Potrero Hill Neighborhood House**

**Candidate Questionnaire**

Candidate name: Karen Fleshman  
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*Please write a brief response (up to 200 words) to each question. **Please email the completed questionnaire to [contact us@phdemclub.org](mailto:contact_us@phdemclub.org) by Monday, September 5.** The questionnaires will be made available online to club members.*

**If elected, what are your top 3 goals for SFUSD? Specifically, how do you plan to accomplish these goals?**

**Top three:**

**Invest in students' and educators' social-emotional well-being and academics**

- Encourage every SFUSD school to adopt simple practices that help students' and educators' social and emotional well-being, setting them up for learning success.
- Ensure educators receive the professional development, prep time, and tools they need to improve literacy and math and prepare young people for college and career pathways.

**Provide budget transparency and accountability**

- Work with the District's finance team to improve budget transparency.
- Advocate for SFUSD to pay teachers and school site staff on time and restore their benefits.
- Ensure current bond funding is used to repair SFUSD property in a timely manner and support future bonds to modernize school sites.
- Increase resources for the most marginalized schools and students.

**Promote collaborative decision making**

- Improve HOW SFUSD does things, including how we engage with communities, how we treat students and educators, how we make decisions, how we get along with each other, even when we disagree.

- Unite the community, parents, unions, and administrators to understand the current and projected SFUSD budget and build consensus on priorities, vision, equity.
- Co-create a multi-year plan so people know what to expect.
- Source solutions from those who are closest to the problem.

**What are the specific skills/expertise that you have that you think will help you achieve these goals?**

My expertise includes community outreach, how to change city-wide systems and increase federal state and local funding to better serve young people, and being a mentor to many young people who were first in their families to graduate college or as they began family-supporting careers without a college degree.

For 10 years I worked for the [NYC Department of Youth and Community Development](#). My first role there was conducting outreach to immigrants to assist them to apply for US citizenship. My team and I figured out how to reach out to each particular group and earn their trust. While working full-time during the day, I attended law school at night, and passed the bar.

In the early 2000s reports came out documenting that [50% of Black men](#) in NYC did not have a job and that there were nearly 200,000 [young adult New Yorkers](#), largely Black and Latinx, who were not in school and not working. To address these systemic inequalities, I became part of the team at DYCD who overhauled the youth workforce development and out-of-school time systems in NYC to become more equitable and effective at achieving better outcomes for young people. We piloted programs using philanthropy, built up the evidence that they worked and then secured additional public money to support them. I cofounded [Ladders for Leaders](#), a City service that places thousands of young people in paid summer jobs with leading employers in New York City. As an Assistant General Counsel and Director of Internal Review, I managed audits, program accountability, contracts, and budgets to ensure our programs served young people well and spent their budgets correctly.

For 10+ years I worked as a Director of Development and fundraising consultant to college and career access nonprofits, including [Year Up](#), the most effective youth workforce program in the country at increasing earnings among young people who are disconnected from the economic mainstream. We reported in granular detail about the outcomes we helped young people achieve in college access and career pathways. We cocreated a high expectations high support learning environment that meets young people where they are, helps them to better understand their strengths and growth areas, and connects them with the skills experiences network and knowledge they need to succeed in college, careers, and life. I mentor many young people who were first-generation college graduates or launched family-supporting careers without incurring college debt. I visited nearly every SFUSD school.

**If you are an incumbent, please tell us what you are most proud of. If you are the challenger, describe something the incumbent(s) did that you would have done differently.**

I would not have returned Lowell to a “merit-based” admissions policy that does not comply with California law and will likely not withstand a legal challenge. Instead, I would have convened community stakeholders to cocreate an equitable admissions policy that complies with the law and leads to greater diversity equity and inclusion at Lowell.

**Families Abandoning SFUSD: Do you believe SFUSD should be doing more to attract and retain families who have alternative options to SFUSD and why?**

To attract more families to SFUSD and increase enrollment, we need to invest in students’ and educators’ social-emotional well-being and academics, provide budget transparency and accountability, and promote collaborative decision-making, resulting in better outcomes for our young people. The better outcomes we achieve, the more confidence we will instill in families to enroll their students in SFUSD.

**What do you believe SFUSD is not doing now and could be doing differently to attract or retain these families?**

We could retain more students at the high school level by improving our high school programming. I go into more detail in the question below about high schools. I will work to strengthen partnerships between SFUSD, employers, unions, and youth-serving nonprofits so that each high school graduate lands in a college or career of their choice. I want SFUSD to develop an individualized learning plan for each student from ninth grade through college graduation- what are you good at? What are you curious about? What is your dream college or career? And then connect them with the skills and experiences, including paid summer jobs, that will set them up to graduate into the college or career of their dreams.

**School Assignment System: What role should the Board of Education play in the changes planned for elementary school assignment? What metrics would define the new system as a success?**

I want to see safe, positive, diverse schools in every neighborhood that ALL students and educators want to come to, where all students and educators feel seen, heard, loved and connected. Data shows diverse schools produce positive academic, social, and emotional learning outcomes.

The current lottery system leads to segregated, unevenly resourced schools, long commutes, traffic and environmental impact, an exclusionary culture at some schools, and contributes to our attendance problems. It is stressful for everyone, especially students who, like one of my kids, got assigned to a school different from their friends that is very far from our home.

The new student assignment policy for elementary schools that will go into effect in 2025-2026 is a step in the right direction. The metrics I would consider: did elementary

schools become more diverse? Did they become more equitably resourced with budget, educators and school site staff, and safe, state-of-the-art facilities? Did commute times to and from school shorten? Did the gap between students reading at grade level narrow? Did the students and families report higher satisfaction with SFUSD?

**Middle School Redesign: Has this initiative been successful? What resources, plans or changes for our middle schools would you advocate for on the school board, if elected?**

Starting before the pandemic, we are in the midst of the [worst youth mental health crisis](#) in our nation's history. Middle school-aged young people are going through tremendous physical and emotional changes. Many experienced trauma during COVID, many are grieving, and many are having a difficult time adjusting to being in person with each other again, so it is important that we treat our young people and the educators who serve them with compassion.

As the implementation of the middle school redesign is still in process I believe it is too soon to tell if it has been successful yet. I am grateful for the shift in start times in keeping with what we know about adolescents' sleep needs. In general I believe the middle school redesign is applying [what scientists know](#) about adolescent brain development and what motivates middle schoolers to our middle schools, a step in the right direction, but there is still much work to be done.

According to SFUSD [outcomes report](#), SFUSD measures high school readiness of students leaving middle school as: daily attendance above 95%, GPA of 2.5 or higher, no D's or F's in English or Math in the Spring semester, and no suspensions. The percent of students exiting middle school ready for high school is falling, from 60% in prior years to 47% in 2021-22. Just 15% of Black students and 25% of Latinx students left middle school last June ready for high school.

If elected I will advocate to invest in students' and educators' social-emotional well-being and academics, provide budget transparency and accountability, and promote collaborative decision-making. I believe those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, so I will listen to middle schoolers, their educators and families and nonprofit service providers to middle school students about what needs to change and what needs to grow to help middle school students succeed. I will also pay close attention to what school districts are doing around the country to improve middle schools.

I will advocate to close the equity gap between middle schools in San Francisco by bringing our underresourced middle schools up to the standards of those with state-of-the-art facilities and credentialed educators. I will advocate for project-based learning. We also need to hire more adults our young people can relate to and work on unlearning racist beliefs and behaviors.

To address middle school students' social-emotional needs and improve their ability to concentrate on learning, I will advocate for peer-led learning including [Peer Resources](#), who lead conversations on sexuality, substances, bullying and other important topics for middle schoolers, and for restorative practices. As a parent in an SFUSD school where we practiced restorative justice under our past principal, I have witnessed that to succeed, restorative

justice has to be done in a comprehensive way, with all adults on the same page and clear, consistently upheld behavior standards for the entire community.

Based on what SFUSD educators have told me, I will advocate to increase the introduction of pre-algebra concepts in 6th grade and 7th grade to ramp up to algebra in 8th grade, and for the expansion of algebra to two years, 8th grade and 9th grade, so that students have enough time to learn algebra at a pace that is not overwhelming. I will advocate for STEAM curriculum, maker spaces, career and technical education, and hands on learning like at Willie Brown in all middle schools. I want to see every SFUSD middle school to have a beautiful outdoor space like at Presidio.

**High Schools: What resources, plans or changes for our high schools would you advocate for on the school board, if elected? Please weigh in but do not limit your answer to Lowell.**

I addressed Lowell in my answer to what I would do differently from the current board.

Currently according to the SFUSD outcomes report only 57.5% of SFUSD graduates are college and career ready. This is unacceptable, especially in a city that people move to from all over the country and all over the world for limitless career opportunities. I want to see 100% of SFUSD graduates land in the college or career of their dreams.

As mentioned above, I want SFUSD to work with every 9th grader on an Individualized Learning Plan that will connect them with the skills, experiences, knowledge, and networks to achieve their dreams, including paid summer jobs at leading San Francisco employers and enrichment activities. Every high school needs partnerships from 9th grade through college graduation between educators, nonprofit organizations and universities like the partnership between [Mission High, Mission Graduates, and San Francisco State University](#) that sent more Mission High graduates to UC and CSU than any other high school in SF.

We need to expand Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) college access program district-wide and make college tangible and accessible for our first-generation students. All high school students should have access to dual enrollment, visits to college campuses, help for their families to understand financial aid, etc. There are many college access nonprofits in SF, I would like each of them to have a designated high school partner, providing services on site.

I am a strong supporter of career and technical education and have mentored many young adults who attained family-supporting careers without incurring college debt through career and technical education. Every high school needs classes where students can earn certifications, strong career and technical education and union pre-apprenticeships and internships with employers. Students benefit greatly from real-world experiences. I would like to see companies that get tax incentives or have community benefit agreements hosting

SFUSD interns and apprentices. I want unions and SFUSD to develop pre apprenticeship programs. I want to see every SFUSD student in paid summer jobs from ninth through graduation that introduce them to all San Francisco has to offer.

**Opportunity / Achievement Gap: Please name one SFUSD strategy at closing the opportunity / achievement gap that has failed and explain why and one strategy that has either succeeded or has the potential to succeed and explain why.**

First of all, I oppose the term “achievement gap” because it makes it sound like Black Latinx Native and Pacific Islander students and their families are responsible for their educational outcomes. They are not responsible for their educational outcomes.

Instead, [going back to 1851](#), when the first public school was created in San Francisco, people of San Francisco who hold wealth and power have failed and continue to fail Black Latinx Native and Pacific Islander students and their families by perpetuating systemic racism in our schools.

Black parents [represented by the NAACP](#) have litigated systemic racism in SFUSD for decades. SFUSD was under a consent decree from 1978- 2005 to desegregate our schools that succeeded for a period of time until Chinese American plaintiffs sued claiming they were discriminated against in Lowell admissions. After the court overseeing the desegregation of SFUSD modified school admissions policies under the settlement reached with the Chinese American plaintiffs, SFUSD schools once again divided along racial lines.

Today, San Francisco is 40% white but only 13% of public school students are white. Thirty percent of families in San Francisco send their kids to private schools. According to [an analysis of SFUSD schools published last week](#) by the SF Chronicle, “About 60% of the 99 non-charter schools analyzed have “highly segregated” student populations compared with the districtwide racial composition.”

Nationally, [79% of public school teachers are white](#). Studies show teachers [disproportionately expel Black students](#), [adultify Black girls](#), [infantilize white girls](#), and punish [Black students more severely than white students](#). Black Latinx Native and Pacific Islander students report [they feel less safe, less connected to school and less connected to a caring adult than their white and Asian peers](#). Even within the same building, Black Latinx Native and Pacific Islander students are not having the same school experience as their peers. [Students who have been suspended or expelled](#) are twice as likely to drop out and are also more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system, the school-to-prison pipeline.

It is imperative that Black Latinx Native and Pacific Islander students have access to fully resourced, well-maintained schools and to caring adults with whom they relate, who make them feel seen, heard, loved, and connected. I will advocate to hire more global majority educators, social workers and other support staff.

Those of us who are not Black Latinx Native and Pacific Islander- myself included- must continuously work on ourselves to unlearn our racist conditioning and learn to see and respect the humanity of global majority students and families. We need to unlearn our

anti-Black beliefs and behaviors. We must know deep in our hearts that all families and all students love learning and that it is the parents' and educators' job to role model anti-racism and provide high expectations and high support to all students in a culturally respectful way.

Whatever school integration policy SFUSD implements can be thwarted by parents choosing to send their kids to segregated schools or private schools. To change the system, white parents like me need to deliberately choose to send our children to global majority schools and be mindful of the way we show up at our kids schools. I am a proud supporter of [Integrated Schools](#).

Diversity on its own does not create a culture of belonging. We need to work on healing racial divides within our schools. I co-facilitated anti-racism workshops at my kids' school, for both the PTA and for the parents at large.

We must change our budget priorities as a state. California is the world's fifth-largest economy, home to more billionaires than any other state. We used to have the best public schools and best public university system, and then we passed Proposition 13 and three strikes laws and began prioritizing prisons over schools. Now our K-12 public schools rank [40th, between Wyoming and West Virginia](#). We should be number one in public schools and in order to get there, we must reform Prop 13 and make sure commercial property owners pay their fair share.

As for a strategy that works, I believe that those closest to the problem are closest to the solution; therefore my approach will be to listen to global majority students, their families, and educators and school site staff as experts in supporting, implementing and enhancing existing strategies or co-developing new strategies to support of global majority students. And we must work together to change the systemic barriers that result in gaps.

[Research demonstrates](#) that culturally respectful individualized student success coaching works to improve academic, social and emotional learning and close gaps. Universal preK would ensure more students enter kindergarten fully ready. For all students, the strategies should be focused on students feeling a sense of belonging on campus and in the classroom, adequate nutrition throughout the day, and student success coaches during the school day.

### **Teacher Retention: How has the Board of Education failed SFUSD teachers and what can it do to support and retain them?**

Public education must be supported through adequate funding to ensure schools are well-funded and educators are paid as the professionals they are. As "mama" to two SFUSD students whose educators go above and beyond, it breaks my heart to see SFUSD educators who love teaching and want to provide our students with the schools they deserve, but don't have enough resources to do their jobs right.

To better support and retain our teachers, we need to invest in students' and educators' social-emotional well-being and academics, provide budget transparency and accountability, and promote collaborative decision-making. We need to Improve HOW SFUSD does things, including how we treat educators, how we make decisions, how we get along with each other, even when we disagree.

The Board of Education has failed educators in so many ways, recently by failing to pay them on time and accurately and improperly administering their benefits, issuing layoff notices and then rushing to hire educators. Longer term, San Francisco is the most expensive city in the Bay Area, yet we pay our educators less than the surrounding counties. The Board has failed to develop affordable housing for educators. Under the [Williams v State of California](#) settlement legislation, SFUSD is required to ensure our schools are in good condition for all students and educators. As reported in [El Tecolote](#), SFUSD has a \$38,750 contract with a building inspector, George Kalligeros of Elmast Construction and Inspection Services, who is paid \$125 an hour to inspect schools across the district. In 2021 he reported to the State of California that the 38 schools he inspected were either in good or exemplary condition, despite the abundant evidence of broken windows, falling ceiling tiles, rodent infestations, and filthy, unusable bathrooms.

Educators tell me that the Board's frequent shifts in curriculum coupled with turnover and lack of professional development lead to a lack of consistency in the classroom. They want the Board to provide them with the professional development, prep time, and tools they need to improve literacy and math and prepare young people for college and career pathways. And they want to try an approach consistently over a period of time, improve on it, and evaluate its effectiveness before discarding it. They want universal PreK so all students enter kindergarten ready. They want training in restorative practices to address behavior.

I want to partner with educators to fully fund San Francisco public schools so we can achieve the outcomes we all want for SFUSD students. I am grateful for the leadership UESF has demonstrated advocating for the Student Success Fund and see that as a great model. In the near term I will partner with UESF and the Board of Supervisors to raise more local resources for SFUSD. Then ensure through budget transparency and accountability that the money has its intended results, and work with stakeholders statewide to reform Prop 13.

**Describe your views on the role of charter schools in San Francisco. Do you support an equitable allocation of resources to charter schools relative to district schools - why or why not?**

I encourage innovation within the existing public schools. I don't support charter school expansion because I believe they drain resources from public schools. Some charter schools offer an alternative that sometimes the public education system is ill-equipped to provide. For example, Five Keys charter school in SF has done an amazing job educating our justice-involved youth and adults that otherwise would have been under-educated by SFUSD.

**Budget: What allocations in the current budget are higher/lower than needed and why? Please describe your current or previous experience with budgetary oversight.**

Something I will pay close attention to is the amount of money SFUSD is spending to settle litigation. Why are so many plaintiffs suing SFUSD? Are we learning from the lawsuits and changing our policies and practices to comply with the law so that we do not get sued again? The money SFUSD is spending settling lawsuits is reactive. It would be more cost-effective to invest that money in our students and educators in compliance with the law so we do not have to contend with costly litigation.

As an Assistant General Counsel and Director of Internal Review at the New York City Department of Youth and Community Development, then a \$500MM City agency, I managed audits, program accountability, procurements, contracts, and budgets to ensure our programs served young people well and spent their budgets correctly. As a development director, I set annual revenue plans and was responsible for hitting fundraising targets and reporting on the outcomes we achieved with the funds.

*Thank you for taking the time to fill this out, and thanks for running!*

You are welcome, thank you for asking important questions and I look forward to meeting you at my interview.