

Alison Kahmi Candidate Interview for Palo Alto School Board

by Steven Davis of DisabilityAlmanac.com

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Opening Remarks

hello everyone I'm Alison Kahmi I'm very excited to be running for palo alto School Board I come to you first and foremost as an Engaged parent I have uh one child who just finished Elementary School and is now at Green Middle School and I have another child who just started Escondido in kindergarten so I've been in the district more than six years and I'm looking at another 13 I'm very invested I also come to you as an experienced attorney um I uh do policy work by day and I'm very excited to bring those skills to the school board and third I come as a child advocate I've represented children I've advocated on their behalf I've set policy at the state and National level on behalf of children and their families I'm very excited to be here um as a candidate to bring uh these skills and my investment uh in our district um to you

All six of the candidates for the palo alto school board in 2024 were invited to these interviews the five active candidates responded and were provided with a complete copy of the questions in advance these questions do focus on special education but I believe they will give you a good sense of the way each of the candidates think and will approach whatever issues they face on the job uh full details and the transcripts of all of the interviews will be available at disabilityalmanac.com/p2024 again disabilityalmanac.com/p2024 enjoy the interview.

If you are talking to your grandkids 10 or 25 years from now long after you've served your two terms if you want on the school board what accomplishment would you share with them?

one of my priorities um is safety and one accomplishment that I would hope to share is that I made our children and our district safer and when I talk about safety uh I mean that in the broadest sense I mean investing in Mental Health Services I mean investing in special education services I mean investing um to make sure that we have very strong protocols against bullying against hate speech I mean bike safe and I also mean gun violence prevention

There are both general education students and special education students who are not going to college at PAUSD what are your thoughts on the current state of our vocational and post-secondary programs now and where do you think they should move?

yeah a great question I was just speaking with someone earlier this week who helped develop the

pathways program um at PUSD uh my understanding is that there's about um 9% of folks at Pali who don't go on to college and 8% at gun so while the majority of our students are going to college we still have a significant percentage who are not and we need to make sure that we are addressing those students and preparing them to succeed as well so I mentioned one of my campaign priorities is safety another one is opportunities for all and by opportunities for all I do include uh that we need to make sure our vocational and post-secondary programs are serving our students um we have certification uh certification programs my understanding is that combines study and work experience to get certifications that folks can then use um to go on to certain careers so my questions as a board member would be are these programs working who takes advantage of them if people are not taking advantage of them why not what are the barriers uh so I would want to make sure that they are working for our students investigate to see what the data says and make decisions based on that information

Deciding to run for the school board is a big decision was there a specific reason or incident or experience or a straw that broke the camel's back that inspired you to run now this year?

yeah great question um I am as I mentioned a policy attorney um I help write help implement uh policies um on many institutional uh County state federal level through that work I've learned that all change is local um and I can think of nothing more impactful than working right here where our students in our community live to serve um our community I have been increasingly involved at the district level over the last several years um I served on the school board ad hoc Child Care committee a couple of years ago to try to expand after care options for lowincome English as second language special special needs foster care and unhoused youth um as part of that ad hoc board committee I worked with board members with teachers with principals with other stakeholders I think we came up with a pretty good solution to expand after care options for more students um as part of that I thought gosh this is a table I want to be at I think I have skills to offer and I see it as an extension of the work I do um on behalf of children uh uh in the policy sphere I've also been involved um in gun violence prevention um so there was a state law last year saying that um districts have to communicate about the safe storage laws that we have here in California to students and I thought here's our hook um let's get out there and be at all of the school sites um that we can be at to with a three-pronged approach let's offer information to students in their back to school packets let's have it translated into English to into Spanish and Mandarin and also have it in English um let's have tables from be smart which is a nonpartisan nonpolitical parent education Outreach organization about gun violence prevention and let's have a little blurb that either the principal or the PTA president can say to alert families community members staff and teachers to the resources out there for gun violence prevention it was I think an incredibly successful experience last year um I founded uh with a dear friend um the co-chair position of gun violence prevention at the Palo Alto PTA Council um and we are doing it again right now so I was at Green last night I was at duven Tuesday I'm going to be at P tonight um and uh so through this work I have um really come to believe that running for school board is is the an extension of of this work and another way for me to focus on these issues

Inclusion for students with disabilities has been steadily improving nationally but according to the 21 March report by the school district, inclusion has been steadily declining over the past 5 years here. What is your read on the situation for inclusion in Palo Alto and what if anything needs to be done?

yeah a great question um I believe fundamentally that if Palo Alto uh is the number one wants to be the

number one um School District we need to be number one across the board and that includes in special education so I know inclusion is the goal for many students um and I would want to take a hard look at why this proportion um is uh decreasing um for disabled students spending time in general education and why is the higher proportion of students spending more of their day in a separate class um to look to figure out what uh what can be done um the board is a lay board overseas experts so I'd really want to bring in folks here um who are expert on these issues work with family members community members teachers particularly special ed teachers as well um to to try to get a a better look at at what can be done

At the very last board meeting in June in the information only slide packages there was a report that was not discussed showing that there was a substantial number of eighth grade students failing math what are your thoughts on this matter and what do you think about how the district and board should handle issues like this in the future?

yeah a great question I I think that if a substantial number of eth grade students are failing math that matters uh it should be given attention it should be given attention um in the board meeting uh it should be also given attention out outside of the board meeting in in the work of the district um looking to see why why is that um who are the students that are failing math are we seeing any Trends um uh what has it been the communication with the parents with the families with the teachers and really address it in a way that um uh involves input from all of these stakeholders

What are your thoughts on suspending students in elementary and middle school some other school districts have banned suspension for children this young as they are not really of an age where they can make rational decisions the children probably consider being out of school a reward and the data shows that there's substantial dis proportionality in the use of these suspensions?

so I started out my legal career representing unaccompanied immigrant youth um to be a child's lawyer means to represent them not just in family court and their guardianship proceeding not just in Immigration Court and their deportation proceeding but also often times in their IEP in school in other disciplinary actions in school and so I know um from from my work representing youth the disproportionate impact that suspensions have on um lowincome youth on lowincome youth of color and um uh children with special needs um I also know that school discipline overall um uh also uh can fall um and have a dispro disproportionate impact on certain groups um I think that's really problematic um I also know that our suspension rate my understanding is is fairly low last data I saw um uh was uh was quite low so I know numerically it is not affecting a lot of our students but it is disproportionately impacting um certain uh certain marginalized groups and I think that that's uh I I think that's problematic

You've been running for several months now and listening to a lot of people without naming names or revealing something specific or personal what have you learned that has surprised you the most?

um so I'll start by saying how much I've enjoyed meeting with so many people uh across our district uh and even in neighboring districts um about uh about Palo Alto schools um we are incredibly fortunate

to have so many people who have experience expertise um and passion about our schools I'd say one thing that surprised me pleasantly surprised me is how many people are invested in our schools that don't have children in the district who no longer have children in the district who maybe never had children in the district um the palto schools are a real Gem of paloalto and and I it's been really um uh wonderful for me to see how many people are invested in the future of this District um even who do not have uh have have kids in the in the district

There seems to be a lot of tension between the teachers and the school board and the District administration the negotiations with the teachers union appeared quite contentious and at least in board meetings there were a number of cases where the district and teachers did not seem to be communicating how do you read the situation and what if anything would you do either about the relationship between the board and the teachers or the district and the teachers

about two of my campaign priorities uh if elected so one is safety for all um two is opportunities for all and three is Community Trust so this third priority to me is about communication um and I think here is an example where I would do all I could where I elected to make sure we did didn't get to that point to make sure that we understood um what uh teachers priorities were that there were regular meetings that there was time um the board meetings for uh the teacher Union to to present um and the dialogue was was really kept open so that uh priorities are clear and um when the negotiations do come up that everybody knows where where the others are coming from

From the perspective of a number of parents of students with disabilities that's 1,58 out of the 10,318 total students in the district in the Years 2022 2023 the district has been restructuring the program without meaningful prior parental consultation and reducing Services uh there's been a reduction of Elementary Learning Center sites from 7 to 5 in 2023 and the restructuring of the preschool program to a Learning Center uh from a previously inclusive program in 2024 and dropping a math program at JLS in 2023 what is your view of the situation and what if anything do you intend to do about it?

um so to me there are two parts to this one is a process part and one is a result part so how are we making these decisions and then of course what what is the decision that we're making as a district and this goes back for me for that priority I mentioned about um Community Trust uh and so I I believe very strongly um that we need to keep the um lines of communication open so that when the district is making a decision um there's an opportunity for input uh that folks uh understand why a decision is made um that if a decision is made um that uh goes against the wishes of certain parents or certain community members people understand the rationale behind that decision um so that that process uh is very clear and again I think this means being for me to be as a board member making sure that I am accessible making sure that I'm transparent making sure that we're making decisions based on data um based on evidence um and that we are um uh being as communicative as possible about our decisions about our process and also about timeline um when decisions will be reached when new um uh policies will go into effect when programs will come or go so that everybody is aware and has the information um about any changes

How do you see the participation by the members of the public in School board meetings as meetings held in public where the public is principally the audience for a meeting of the board or as a public meeting where the public is a critical part of the proceedings both to raise new topics and explore agenda items?

so I mentioned earlier that one of the things that has been um so pleasantly surprising to me is just how invested our community is in our school system that is not the situation in many different districts um across our state across our country so I think um we are in the the fortunate position to have a lot of folks who have the expertise who have the experience who have the passion um and and we should be using that so really uh involving um public asking for Community input um in uh involving uh the public in those Schoolboard meetings um so that the public is a is a critical part of those proceedings

Lots of parents are going to come to you for advice what would you advise a parent who is concerned about getting their child assessed for special education services and B how would you advise a parent whose child has been determined to be eligible for special education services but is concerned about using them?

um so I'll take the the first part first so advising a parent who's concerned about getting their child assessed for schedule Education Services um I would talk to this parent about um how every child has their own story um and uh that it's important to make sure that the school district is able to serve that child in the best way um for that child uh and so getting that assessment could be helpful um for the district for the teachers for the stakeholders to be providing information education um Services uh to that child if needed if appropriate um second uh about advising a parent whose child has been determined to be eligible but is concerned about using them I would really want to talk about what that concern is um again as a an attorney who represented youth who represented families I know that concern can come from a a lot of different places uh it could be fear of stigma it could be fear of affecting different aspects of their life um it could be not understanding the process which can be uh slightly foreign and bureaucratic um to to navigate um and so I would really want to learn what are those concerns coming from um what resources can I or or offer or be a liaison to offer from the district um are they aware of um the resources uh on the district's website are they aware of the parent support groups are they aware of the handbook um uh to make sure that folks are able to make a determination that works uh for them and their family

The number of students has been steadily decreasing for the past several years now in Palo Alto Unified School District at the rate of around 200 students per year and is projected to continue to do so according to the District budget estimates the number of students with disabilities is also decreasing at a similar though slightly lower rate how do you perceive this situation and what do you intend to do about it if you are elected?

so I've been meeting with not only with current board members but also with prior board members and I know that this is not the first e and flow that that we have had in this district and so talk to Prior board members about the challenges that they faced trying to decide what to do uh about different schools um I know that it is the numbers are not not changing consistently across our schools so some schools are seeing um greater declines than others um and and the challenges that that presents uh for board members so I think as a board member were I to be elected I would continue to do the same to try to figure out how these challenges were met in the past um with hindsight what decisions were uh how

those decisions played out um and what to do right now uh uh facing the changes in enrollment

Nationally and in Palo Alto there is a lot of discrimination against disabled people and children what do you think the school district should do to change that culture ?

I think there should be zero tolerance for discrimination against anyone um including disabled people and children I think I have unique experience working against discrimination and would bring that to the board um I started at a young age working um to uh against uh harassment bullying discrimination marginalization racism anti-Semitism in my high school I worked with the national uh conference for community and Justice um that had summer camps for children about differences and belonging um I uh worked um in former East Germany um with immigrant youth on issues of belonging um and at my uh in my current job more recently I I do um work at a national nonprofit um where we do policy work on behalf trying to fight for um um for rights for all people uh in that I have um advocated uh both personally representing youth um who have been discriminated against and also in a systemic level um to try to push for more inclusive policies uh across the board so I bring that experience um to the board and would um not only try on a systemic level to make sure that we have policies that are not discrimin but also make sure on the enforcement side um that we are taking those issues that of discrimination that may arise very seriously and then third that we are being um as encouraging and inclusive as possible to make sure that we have uh Children and Families um with uh who who are disabled participating uh in leadership

One of the biggest impacts you are likely to have as a school board member is on Direct constituent Services addressing the problems that families have that they haven't been able to address through other means how do you plan to be available to parents for this service and navigate between individual issues and larger policy problems?

I think communication is key um so I think uh if I were to be elected um to be on the board me to be on the board to make sure that families have access to information that they need I would try to be transparent I would try to be accessible uh I would be available to help families navigate it knowing that each individual child has their own story and also looking for trends that might indicate a larger policy problem this is a position I'm familiar playing I work as a liaison often um in my role as an attorney bringing issues that we see in the field um that individuals have to the state and National level to try to address uh more systematically so i' bring those skills able to address somebody both as a person who has their own individual needs and also if we're seeing Trends um to indicate that something larger needs to be done to address it

While Palo Alto is very highly ranked for general education in California the performance gap between our special education students and general education students is larger virtually across the board and this is true for other marginalized groups as well a particular note is that 43.5% of suspensions are of students with disabilities even though they are just 10.3% of our student population what is your goal to close the performance Gap and other areas of disproportionality and how quickly do you want the district to work to close it?

as soon as possible I I think it's urgent that we use our resources we are a well resourc District we are not an infinitely resourced District but we are a well-resourced district to prioritize um uh academic

opportunities for all so again this is one of my campaign priorities that we are thinking creatively uh and very seriously about how to make sure that we are serving all of our students um if pal Alto does want to be number one school district we have to be a number one school district for all of our students I also since suspensions were mentioned again um do want to comment how seriously I take that those suspensions disproportionately affect students with disability ities um and other uh marginalized group particularly low income and students of color

Four years from today at the end of your first term you are up for reelection what is one concrete substantial accomplishment that you will be telling us about in this forum in four years?

so I'd like to say in four years um that I have increased uh Community Trust in the district um we are in an increasingly divisive political climate and I come to this race um and to a potential role in the board from a position of bringing us together on our shared values we have an incredible community in Palo Alto and I really think that we want to leverage that Community leverage our resources leverage the real talent of our teachers of our staff of our students of our community members um to come together uh and really be the best District that we can be

Would you like to share some closing remarks?

I'd like to thank you for listening to me so far for um giving me the the opportunity to say a little bit about what I think and what I believe our priorities are so in closing my three priorities are about safety for all opportunity for all and Community Trust um I believe that I have the skills uh as an Engaged parent um as an experienced attorney as uh someone who has devoted their life to helping others to helping children uh to make that happen so

I hope you will join me in thanking the five active candidates for the Palo Alto school board in 20124 for participating in this interview you can find the full transcript uh and all of the videos at disabilityalmanac.com/pa2024