

Josh Salcman Candidate Interview for Palo Alto School Board

by Steven Davis of DisabilityAlmanac.com

(this transcript was largely automatically generated and processed via ChatGPT by Josh, raw transcript available on request – please verify it with the audio at: <https://youtu.be/kr1lH0cgMT8>)

Opening Remarks

Hi, my name is Josh Salcman, and I am running for school board for the Palo Alto Unified School District. Before I say anything else, I just want to thank Steven Davis for putting these opportunities together for candidates to introduce themselves and for all of you to get to know us a little better, especially in relation to these topics that are so important to me and I know to Steven, and I'm assuming to you if you're watching this.

I am a full-time parent. I have been for the last seven years. Seven years ago, I was taking a break after founding two education technology startups. At that time, my youngest child, who was two, was diagnosed with hearing loss in both ears. As we were driving him around to audiology appointments, speech therapy appointments, and developmental pediatrician appointments, my wife and I looked at each other and said, "There's just no way that we're going to be able to support him the way he needs unless one of us focuses on this full-time." That became me.

That's what I've been doing, and it's given me an amazing opportunity in a number of ways, which have led me to being here as one of the candidates for school board this cycle.

The first way is that it's given me tremendous appreciation for how different every student can be and how unique their individual needs are. This ranges from how children perceive the world, how they make sense of it, how they interact with it, their emotional responses, and how they communicate their needs, desires, and ambitions. I think it's really important that we look at each child as an individual and figure out how best to support them. I'll get back to that in some of my other answers.

Another thing this opportunity presented was a chance to get involved in the schools. I've been a volunteer in classrooms and on playgrounds. I've facilitated social interactions between students, de-escalated conflicts, and volunteered with the PTA as VP of Fundraising, Treasurer, and the Special Ed and Inclusion Rep. Over this time, I've gotten to know teachers, principals, and other parents. It's given me an opportunity to see the school district from various angles, which ultimately led me to think that I wanted to get more involved and give back in a broader scope. That's why I'm running for school board.

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?

I think we, as a society, are facing some accelerating challenges that will require important decisions. Two examples would be climate change and artificial intelligence. These are issues that make people nervous. However, I'm glad my son, who has special needs, is growing up in today's world and not the world I grew up in. While some things may be headed in a negative direction, one thing that is moving positively is acceptance and inclusion of students with different needs.

As a school board, we will need to navigate these different issues. I hope we will use our imaginations and data to think about the future of work and how different people can have meaningful, productive lives that may not look the way they have in past generations. We need to think about the role of the school system in helping children become the fullest versions of themselves, preparing them for an uncertain future. If we succeed in navigating this time of change, I'd be very proud of that.

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?

This is a great question because it gets to the heart of something very important to my campaign and candidacy. It's essential that we figure out the best way to support the diversity of students in our district. That means identifying each student's strengths, challenges, goals, and ambitions for the future.

Having a strong vocational program and a strong postsecondary program for students who need or want those is critical. This is a topic I don't know as much about as I'd like, but it's something I hope to learn more about, especially in terms of our postsecondary program. I'm not an expert in this area yet, nor in our vocational programs.

I am curious to know why our district doesn't provide pathways for certain trades, like plumbing or electrical work, and for green energy or sustainability-oriented careers. I'd like to understand how we decide which pathways to support and which ones to emphasize for future growth. Part of that will involve getting input from the community on what's of greatest interest and thinking about the future of work and job security in the face of changes like artificial intelligence.

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?

For some candidates, there's one specific thing that motivates them. For me, it's an accumulation of experiences over the last seven years. I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to support children with different needs and about the infinite variety of students in our district. It's critical that we support all of them so they can thrive.

Because of my personal experience with my son, I have a perspective that I believe would be valuable on the board. I can empathize with families dealing with the real challenges of supporting a student with special needs. There are significant pressures, stresses, concerns, and worries that come with that.

Part of why I'm running is wanting to give back to the community. The question then becomes, am I the right person to do it? I think my blend of experience, both professionally and as a parent, would be valuable on the board. Between that perspective, the encouragement I've received from teachers, administrators, my spouse, and other community members, I slowly started taking steps toward this. Next thing I knew, I was submitting papers to run, and I'm gaining confidence that this is the right decision.

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?

This is a great but complicated question. On one hand, we aim to have students spend as much time as possible in the least restrictive environment. One reason for this is that students who may struggle with social skills or behavior regulation can model their behavior after typically developing peers, which helps them grow and learn. Socially, it's important to give special needs students the opportunity to form bonds with their classmates and broaden their friendship circles.

However, in some cases, the support that special needs students require can only be provided in a more concentrated, one-on-one, or small group setting. For example, my son works with a speech therapist in an environment designed for intensive focus. He also participates in small group social interaction sessions with a therapist, which sometimes work better in a controlled setting.

I'd like to know how parents feel about this. Do they feel their students' needs are being met? Would their children be better served spending more time in general education settings, or do they feel their current mix is working? It's hard to say whether this is a problem without diving deeper into the data and understanding parent perspectives.

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?

I'm very concerned about this finding. It suggests one of several possibilities: students may have been placed in math classes they weren't ready for, or they may have struggled during the year and didn't receive the support they needed. We need to figure out which scenario is happening, or if something else is going on.

The district and board need to set goals based on best practices, teacher input, and expert advice, and ensure that processes are in place to assess progress throughout the year. If we aren't moving in the right direction, we need to take corrective action.

It's troubling to reach the end of a school year with so many students failing. We should have had opportunities along the way to identify struggling students and intervene. I would prefer that findings like this don't show up in information-only formats but are discussed so we can figure out how to prevent similar issues in the future.

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 disproportionality in the use of these suspensions?

I am concerned about suspending students this young, for many of the reasons you've mentioned. First, we need to consider the goal of a suspension. Bans, or saying we will always or never do something, are unnecessarily restrictive, so I'm not sure I'd support an outright ban.

We should think about the purpose of a suspension: Is it to make other students feel safe? To send a message? To provide a period for de-escalation or cooling down? There are reasons why an administrator might consider suspension, but we need to look deeper into whether it's the best strategy to achieve the desired outcome.

As you pointed out, behavior is often a form of communication. Children, especially young ones, don't always understand the implications of their actions. They may not realize how their behavior is received or its impact on peers or adults. We should focus on helping children understand the effects of their actions and provide them with appropriate ways to communicate, rather than resorting to suspension.

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?

I know this is my chance to share something juicy, but honestly, what has surprised me most is just how many different things people care deeply about. When I started thinking about running for the school board, there were a few key topics people prepared me to hear about. I've certainly heard about those, but I've also encountered such a wide variety of concerns.

What's also been surprising, and refreshing, is the amount of positivity I've heard. Especially from parents whose children have graduated and had a great experience in the schools. It's been wonderful to hear from parents who feel their children are well-supported and have amazing teachers because we do have a lot of great teachers in this district. We need to make sure we're supporting and appreciating them.

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

One of the things I've been focused on in my campaign is the importance of empathy and open, transparent communication. That includes listening openly to feedback from teachers, parents, and other community members.

Some teachers have expressed that they didn't feel heard during the previous process. To address this, I think it's about making time, being proactive in communication, and setting up listening sessions. The board and teachers' union need to keep lines of communication open, and individual teachers should have opportunities to provide feedback to board members.

We're all on the same team: the school district, the board, parents, and teachers. We're all working to provide the best possible educational outcomes for our students. Focusing on how we can do our best for students will help ease tensions and allow us to work together more effectively.

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?

This is a situation where it's useful to separate process and product. For example, reducing elementary Learning Center sites from seven to five is a case where the district had good reasons for the decision. Supporting a wide range of grade levels for students with significant needs was taxing on staff, and I believe the restructuring objective was a good one. Conversations with some of the affected families suggest the net effect has been positive after the fact.

However, what I've heard from parents is that the process felt abrupt and that they weren't brought in

early enough. Even when the reasons for a decision are valid, involving parents and students who are impacted early in the process and explaining the rationale behind decisions is critical. Empathy and clear communication can make a big difference in how changes are received.

The situation with the preschool program is one I'm sorry to hear about. My son was in the inclusive program at Greendell, and it was an amazing experience. If we're not going to have that particular program, I'd love to see the district consider adding another similar program. Inclusion benefits not only the students with special needs but also typically developing children and their families by fostering empathy and understanding.

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?

This is a great question because it touches on something I see as important for the board going forward: how to encourage more participation from the community in giving feedback on district decisions.

There's a tradeoff between allowing more input at board meetings, which could lead to longer meetings, and making it harder for teachers, administrators, and parents to participate. I'm not certain whether board meetings are the best venue for this. We may need to think beyond meetings and focus on strategies like town halls or listening sessions. We could also explore the idea of allowing members of the public to submit statements that can be read at the board meetings if they can't attend in person.

Having meetings at a fixed time and place can limit participation from certain community members, like parents juggling evening responsibilities. We should try to find ways to reach a broader audience, whether that means board members attending community events or using multiple channels to gather feedback. It needs to be an "all of the above" strategy to ensure that we're hearing from as many voices as possible.

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?

When we were first learning about my son's special needs, it was a time of incredible anxiety and stress. So, the first thing I'd say to any parent in this situation is: Don't panic. There are many sources of support out there, and the special education community is filled with warm, caring people who want to help. I'd also be happy to speak with any parent, and I know many others who would do the same.

My main advice, without knowing the details of the situation, is to learn as much as possible about your child. Talking to different people and getting them assessed through a formal process is almost always a good idea. The more you understand about your child's strengths and challenges, the better you'll be able to support them and collaborate with their teachers.

As for parents who are hesitant about using services, I'd need to understand their concerns before offering specific advice. In our case, we've been very appreciative of the support our son has received. But I know different parents have different worries, and I would want to hear them out before providing guidance.

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?

I'd love to know more about who the students are that we're losing and why this decrease is happening. Is it purely due to demographic trends? Are families opting out of Palo Alto public schools, or are they moving out of the district altogether?

If the change is due to factors we can control, we should take a closer look and see what strategies we can employ to reverse the trend. As for the students with disabilities, I'm not surprised that they may be leaving at a slower rate. My own experience suggests that the public school system provides better support for my son's special needs than some private schools.

We need to figure out why these changes are happening and, if they're beyond our control, think about how we can adjust as a district to ensure we're ready for the future implications of this trend.

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 the district should continue doing some of the things it's already doing, and we should also explore additional strategies.

One of the most important things we can do is provide opportunities for children to interact with others who are different from them, starting as young as possible. The more time children spend around peers of different abilities, backgrounds, and communication styles, the more normal it becomes. That helps reduce discrimination because children grow up accustomed to the idea that people are different.

I'm in favor of steps that give both students and their parents opportunities to interact with disabled peers and their families. This helps foster acceptance and empathy, which I believe will contribute to reducing discrimination over time.

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 plan to make myself available to parents and teachers by being present and visible in the community, attending school events, and ensuring that my contact information is easily accessible.

I'd like to follow Steven Davis's model of hosting forums where people can come and share their concerns or thoughts with me. I'm not sure whether I'd hold these weekly or biweekly, but I want to establish a regular schedule so that people know when and where they can find me.

It's important that we set this up in a way that allows participation from all parts of the community. I'll have to figure out the best strategy as I go, but I'm committed to being available because I believe it's critical for building a cohesive community and ensuring we can work together to support our children.

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?

The 4:1 ratio of suspensions for students with disabilities compared to general education students is very concerning. We need to understand why this is happening. As I mentioned earlier, we should reconsider the purpose of suspensions and whether they are the right strategy. In many cases, I suspect they are not the optimal approach.

Regarding the performance gap, I would reframe this a bit. Rather than looking at generalized comparisons, we should focus on each student's progress from the beginning of the year to the end. What are reasonable, achievable goals that are ambitious yet set our students up for success?

It's essential to look at the individual goals outlined in each student's IEP or 504 plan and ensure they are making appropriate progress. While closing gaps is important, we should do so in a way that values each student individually and sets expectations appropriate to where they start the year.

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?

There are many things I'd like to achieve, but I'll use this opportunity to mention something I think is really important: improving the percentage of teachers who feel well-supported and have a positive feeling about their work in our district.

Teachers, aides, and paraeducators are the most critical part of our students' experience. They make the difference between a year of growth, excitement, and learning or a year where a student feels lost or unengaged. Four years from now, I'd like to see improved survey results from teachers reflecting better support and positive sentiment about working in our district.

Would you like to share some closing remarks?

I would like to thank Steven Davis again for this opportunity to reach an audience I care deeply about, but who can sometimes be hard to reach for very good reasons. As a parent of a child with special needs, I can relate. Sometimes it's all we can do to get through the day and keep our child moving in a positive direction, get them fed, get them to school, and to their various appointments. I know it can be hard for parents of students with special needs to find time to learn about candidates and issues facing our district, so I think this is a great service to the community.

I also want to say that as a parent of a child with special needs, as well as two other children who are typically developing, I have a broad perspective on how different students' needs can be. I have a 10th grader, a third grader, and an eighth grader, which gives me a good sense of the range of needs across different grades and developmental stages.

If you are someone who believes the school district should look at every student as an individual and figure out the best way to support each child, I hope you will consider my candidacy for the school board and support me in the upcoming election. I would love to be your representative on the school board.

Thank you.

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