

Nicole Chiu-Wang Candidate Interview for Palo Alto School Board

by Steven Davis of DisabilityAlmanac.com

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<https://youtu.be/YCVHPVOzRXU>)

Opening Remarks

I'm Nicole Chiu Wong and I'm running for Palo Alto school board I'm a parent in the district I have a preschooler that attends preschool family which is the preschool program run through the adult school in the district at greenell and I have a first grader at alone in the manor and immersion program I'm also the executive director of dream catchers which provides a free after school enrichment and academic support program for almost 200 socio economically disadvantaged and historically underrepresented middle school students in PAUSD as well as providing a sustained Service Learning opportunity for almost 200 PUSD high school students it is this experience and understanding of all the different levels within our educational system in PUSD that make me feel particularly qualified to serve on the school board in addition I was born and raised to public servants career public servants and although my life has played out in very different chapters from being an attorney to switching to Tech and becoming a tech founder and small business owner and operational strategist in big Tech to leaving Big Tech to lead an educational Equity nonprofit here in Palo Alto my life has played out in diverse chapters but service has been a Common Thread and so when my young family chose to move to palato for the schools I thought to myself how can I be of service to my community I met with people when I first moved to understand what are the ways I can get involved and how can I be a leader here and serve my community and they're the ones that suggested that I run in 2022 I ran and although I did very well for someone new to town I lost and it was like getting lemons and so what I've been doing for the last 2 years is making lemonade in addition to leaving Google to lead dream catchers which has been the most rewarding and important and hardest work I have done I also stepped into the role as co-president of the Chinese Parents Club where we provide targeted resources community building events as well as parent education that's so important in our Chinese Community here in Palo I also volunteer and fund raise for the South Palo food closet the alone farm and my children ptas and while the easy answer to why am I running would be because I have skin in the game I'm going to be a parent in the district for the next 14 years it's really because I feel that my unique background personally and professionally prepares me to serve and be able to do the work required to ensure that all of our students are empowered to reach their full potential and Thrive both in PD and Beyond I'm an attorney and as such I know good governance I understand policy and I have the advocacy skills to advocate for all the different stakeholders in our community from parents to students to staff and teachers as an entrepreneur I understand how to grow and build and scale teams as an operational strategist in big Tech I've managed multi-million dollar budgets and I know how to work on teams that include diverse and varied stakeholders and participants um as a biracial Asian-American woman I've been building bridges within communities my entire life and as someone with a degrees in women's studies and Asian-American studies and my current work and all the advocacy work I've done truly since College I understand systemic inequity and the ways that it affects all of our students because Equity is good for

all when you do things to serve our most underserved it helps all of us students and again that's what I want to do on the Schoolboard I want to ensure that our students are empowered to thrive both in school and beyond all of our students

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?

if I had to limit it to one accomplishment I truly feel it would be to become that Palo Alto became the leader and led other school districts in showing them how to truly invest in and build systems around early childhood education and I know that that's not something that a lot of people with older kids think about or maybe the retired folks whether I don't know how much people care about that but that to me is the foundation that is where our children learn to be good citizens and good friends and kind humans that is where they learn the foundation for learning that is where they learn to love learning and that is where the opportunity Gap starts and not just along the lines of finances and racial or ethnic lines but also for our students with disabilities so I think as we hopefully the state introduces preschool for all but Palo Alto should be leading and not just thinking about how do we have quality affordable child care and implement preschool for all but how do we improve transitional kindergarten which currently is where our youngest students come and something that we are doing the minimum as required by the state instead of really stepping into to own we have amazing early childhood education programs within Palo Alto for us to learn from particularly as it relates to inclusion and what true inclusion looks like which is not you're welcome into our space and you may modify your behavior to fit in you may use an aid to fit in but where we think about how can we modify the environment and have all of our students understand that we need to be inclusive with a big eye in understanding how can I make this in an environment in which all of us fit in not how do I welcome you into Myspace and tell you you need to fit in so I want to continue to learn from what we've been doing and expand upon it and do what's absolutely right not what's minimally required because early childhood education is the foundation for all of our students of all of their needs and that's where we can really make a difference if I had a second thing I want to be known for it would be that we change the culture I would love for just as there are now these articles in papers that talk about the culture of pressure and our mental health issues and our suicide clusters I would like during my time on the board for us to get to some sort of point in which palo is known for being a place where our students Thrive not just academically but that they're happy and that they feel valued for who they are and for what they bring to the table because they are but they don't feel that way right now and so those would be the two things I would like to be known for um after I serve my two terms on the school board

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?

I'm very excited that we have um invested in creating a position that is specifically designed to think about Innovation with uh our assistant superintendent Jang ch and we have invested in Career Technical education and College and Career Pathways I think we have good programs and we have particularly excellent programs um and they are to some extent School site specific and they are limited to how much people know about them and I think we have a situation on our hands where communication hasn't been as good as it has been as it needs to be so the parents can learn about these programs I'm thinking specifically early childhood development pathway at p is amazing um social justice pathway also incredible and the ARR the authenticated research that they get to do has led students to determine what they want to go on to do after high school um I have served on the advisory for Career Technical education I've also gone into Pali and spoke at their career speaker series where I've tried to get our students to understand that they don't need to know right now they need to know what they're interested in they need to pursue what they're interested in so I think we have a lot of good programs there's a lack of awareness of them and I'm particularly worried about that lack of awareness as it relates to our families where English is not their first language I think we need to be doing more parent Outreach and translation of materials and through things like the Chinese Parents Club of Palo Alto where I'm the co-president we try to do educational events to tell our families what's out there and what's available but I also think even if you build it it's not if you build it they will come because we have a culture problem so when you talk about um whether going to college is the right path or not which in fact for those that don't know the number one school that our students in PUSD go to in terms of by the numbers is Foothill with 10 to 12% of our students graduating our high schools go to Foothill and that is wonderful we have an amazing Community College um I think more people will become aware of that as we grow the middle college program I'm really excited about that um and then yes there are kids that don't go to college and for that to even be thought of as being an acceptable pathway we have a lot of work to do on the culture and what it means to be successful and how do we redefine that in a way that is empowering to our students where they feel that they can choose an alternate path if that's what interest them and what they're passionate about so I think we have a lot of room to grow and most of our growth needs to be on the front of communication and awareness and shifting our culture about what is an acceptable path what does success look like and I'll tell you success looks like a lot more than going to one of three colleges that are deemed Elite enough for our graduates there are many Pathways to success and in your life and we need to be showing our students that and living those values

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?

so when we moved to Palo Alto I thought how can I be a service to my community and I talked to community leaders and and Schoolboard members and I would say there isn't a straw that broke the camels back but rather there is this nagging feeling that has only grown with my involvement in the community and particularly with those that are um less privileged than some of our most privileged in Palo Alto um it's my understanding that Palo Alto is overall an excellent School District our schools are

overall excellent and so when you have schools that are performing at such a high caliber if they're not serving all their students it becomes really clear that we don't have Equity that we aren't serving all of our students and although I think the vast majority are able to succeed here to me it makes it stand out even are the ones that aren't and so what motivates me is really the fact that I can see that and I can recognize it and that I feel excited to do that work uh I feel like I couldn't have my children participate in this privilege of going to palto schools if I weren't also focused on ensuring that it serves all of our students and and particularly I guess if I were to pick something that really truly motivates me it's the fact that I think that we need more parents with young children involved in elected office and particularly school boards if we're ever going to change the early childhood education aspect of our Educational Systems because people forget it's really easy to forget parenting is hard it is demanding and it is a lot of work at all the levels I I truly believe if you ask most parents they would agree that early childhood education is important and I think someone that has young children is just that much more in the thick of it to be able to advocate for for those improvements.

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?

it's my understanding that we have a high proportion of IEPs in our classrooms and that the proportion that's in our general education classrooms is proportionate to the the overall proportion in terms of the student body but in terms of where they're spending their day I would rely on the staff that's supporting them to make the decision for how they will be best supported and where they should be whether that's um more time in general education or more time in programs specifically designed to help them um sometimes like in Middle School that may mean that they're working more on Executive function or life skills than being able to pick an elective and that is certainly something that each student and their parents should understand when they're making that tradeoff and work with those that are supporting their children to get advice about what they think will best serve their student uh I will say however and I said it earlier that I don't I'm not thrilled with what we consider inclusion in California as a whole and probably also this country where we think that U mainstreaming is the key goal get those kids in general population in um in general education classes because again that is asking them to fit into our mold instead of us taking on an active role in realizing that our world needs to be more inclusive in the way of creating places where they can be themselves because this is what's going to teach our children empathy and how to work with others that are different from them which is only going to serve all of our students as they become hopefully contributing members of our communities and leaders within our communities so my read on inclusion is well I think having them spend 80% or more of their day in general education classes with their peers is generally good we need to make sure that those general education classes and teachers are prepared and equipped to be modifying our spaces to be truly inclusive

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?

so I'm always thinking about root cause analysis and what I think we've done well in this District when we've spotted a problem and what we should use as a framework moving forward in other ways is every student reads initiative so the every student reads initiative whether you agree that we've made as much progress or looked at the data the way that we should because that's the thing with data you can cut it a lot of different ways I I think the point is the overarching point of every student reads is that when we put attention on something and when we commit when we set a goal then we do what we need to do to get closer how close we got maybe is Up For Debate but I think directionally there's only proof that we're going the right way in terms of literacy by third grade which is the every student reads initiative so when I think about eighth grade students failing math I want to know is there a program that we can be doing in elementary school where we're spotting this before they get to e8th grade and fail math because then we're about to drop them into high school and our high schools are the most competitive high schools in the state and we have accelerated students we have students that aren't at grade level we ask our teachers particularly in middle school to be able to differentiate and the differentiation it's the amount of differentiation that be required is so broad that we're setting our we're not appropriately setting our staff and our teachers up to succeed or our students so I think we should use the every student reads initiative as a model and think about how can we do that with math um I am particularly concerned about the focus on academics in early childhood because I think that there needs to be a balance we have engaged a lot of professionals um and experts to understand what is too much um that's what shaped our our homework policy for example where we are technically limiting the amount of homework that our students should be doing because we know at what point it has detrimental effects on learning so I would also in addition to something like the every student reads initiative being a model that we use for other subjects and other things where we see bad Trends happening um I would also think about ways that we could measure the whole student and also take into account not going too far where it actually has a detrimental effect on learning

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?

I think this question is a vital importance and something that at dream catchers we've been considering when we think about traditional Behavior policies um or behavior management policies and and our district along with most other districts if not all in California has utilized punitive systems where we talk about things like zero tolerance and three strikes when I think we should be talking more about our values and what the intent is of these programs and this question really gets to the heart of that what do we get what is the goal when we suspend a child it's to punish them the goal should be how can we work with this child so that they learn and want to make better choices and so we don't continue to have these issues it is not to punish them by by having them be out of school and not learning and not

with their peers it's so that they can learn and grow from this I think we have to acknowledge that children make mistakes and this is actually the time for them to make mistakes and this is the time for us to show them how they can learn and grow and everything needs to be reframed and I understand that this is hard because people feel that when you talk about things like restorative justice and how do we come with a restorative approach where we're calling kids in instead of pushing them out when we talk about that some people are used to punitive systems are used to consequences and they think restorative is no consequences and that is not true it is just logical consequences and so I don't see a logical consequence in suspensions and taking kids out certainly there are things like physical violence that may elevate a situation but it should just change the way you interact with that child and the way you support them to make better choices in the future also another thing I really find Central to this is not just the child that had the incident it's acknowledging that other children saw this and experienced this and so we are now modeling the way this should be handled for all of our children I think we need more Community conversations I think we need to be more proactive with involving parents and not just parents in the issue but the parents of kids that may have also seen this to understand what happened and the values that we're leading with I know at dream catchers we've moved away from punitive systems and things like your child will be removed from program If X Y and Z happens or we have a zero tolerance on this yes first and foremost safety has to be at the Forefront but we also need to acknowledge our students are going to make mistakes and for dream catchers we're leading from values so we are reframing everything to talk about for example things like um you know being disruptive in class that is a culture infraction against our value of respect and we're trying to teach our children these positive values and culture that they're building and then talk about what they're doing in that context of How It's not serving that value and hopefully in that way our children feel like active participants in the environment that they're building and not like they are little robots that are supposed to act a certain way and if they don't they get booted out that just I don't know what that is designed to do but I know what it's not doing it's not teaching our children how to be happy healthy contributing members of the community that they're in which at this time is their school.

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 think when you think about this question I have learned how communication is the central issue that that threads through all the concerns that all the different parent groups and there are many that are that are concerned about specific things whether that's special education or math or um the school lunches or students that have spoken to me with such passion about being concerned about our sustainability efforts there is just not enough understanding and information out there in a clear way for our families and our students to understand what we're doing and for them to be engaged in the process so I think um without that we're basically saying trust us we got it but we need to be pulling people in to be actively involved and we need to be telling them how to do that and what we are already doing what we plan to do um I think I had heard a lot about our ad hoc committees and this last year I got to participate in the parent communication ad hoc committee and what was surprising to me about that was there wasn't it was a huge topic and I don't know I think those of us that were served on the ad hoc committee felt that we didn't fully understand what our specific charge was on that committee and so then it's really hard to come out and feel good about your participation because it's a huge topic and we didn't know what we were supposed to come out with so I think if we were to go rely on this community uh driven committee kind of approach and focusing on having different representatives from all different areas of our community in these committees we have to be very specific about what we want the Committees to achieve and how we're going to present that and then how we're going to follow up so so I think that communication and truly what it means to collaborate and to do things in

committees and in ways in which we're pulling people in to collaborate and making sure we have representation in those groups that are collaborating that is Central to all the issues that I think that people care about in our schools

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

I think it is really something that needs to change at least the appearance of the relationship between the board and the district and our teachers and specifically our teachers union and as well as our CSEA which is our other Union for our staff that are non-certificated and I think what I what I would do is try to show as much try to be as transparent as possible while realizing as an attorney that there are certain things that you're not allowed to share during a union negotiation process so what can be shared and what can't and then making sure I think right now we've got a situation of like a here's one one Side Story here's the other side story and the truth is somewhere in between how do we make sure that that the one with the power which is the district and the board is accurately representing what we believe is happening realizing that we are the ones with the power and so we we need to we need to try to adjust that power and balance and make sure that the teachers feel that it's be accurately represented and we need to ask the teachers what they want and I know everybody thinks it's just about money from talking to teachers from earning the endorsement of teachers from really caring I know that it's not just money there are many things they want more professional development and it should be paid and it should be acknowledged and we ask them for so much so you know what actually helps them what do they actually want they want small classes yes they want higher pay because it is so expensive to live here so what are other things we can do to address that I'm excited that we're leading a pilot to see if we can build teacher and staff housing in our district I hope that when we build those 6,000 units of affordable housing that the state is mandating in palotto that our teachers and our staff want to move to Palo Alto to be a part of our community um I think one easy ask that I want to make and I want to make it very quickly once I'm on the board is agendize time for our Union representatives for both paa and CSEA to have agendized time on the board meeting agenda to speak to present present what they're concerned about what they're seeing how teachers are feeling so that it's not just because right now it looks like they again we have the power we have the mic and they have to communicate during open comment and I know Stephen Davis that you have experienced the timing so have I where you run out of time to be able to say what you want to say and when you think about how much of our budget goes to Staffing and how many teachers and staff members there are I can't even imagine trying to represent that in 2 minutes so we need to agendize time for them to talk about what's going on because we need to acknowledge that we have the power and we need to share some of it with our most um honestly our largest use of our funding which is our largest stakeholder which is our staff I mean yes we have more students than staff but staff is second to the number of students that we have and so we need to make sure our teachers and our staff through their representatives have time and are able to choose how to use that time in terms of elevating and for us to elate what concerns them and for us and everyone to hear it

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?

again I think this goes back to lack of communication and earlier communication so and and also quite frankly collaboration because as we make changes yes there are requirements and I believe we meet the requirements from the state regarding parental notification but that's the minimum we should be doing as soon as we think that these things may be happening like with the elementary Learning Center sites being Consolidated from 7 to 5 I don't think the district decided to do that willy-nilly I think it had reasons and I believe it took into account what teachers that were actually in those centers thought and wanted and how they felt that they could best be supported and therefore support their students better I believe that the way it was messaged was messy and not helpful and counterproductive to getting our families on board to feel that we were making this decision in their best interest and that's part of it it's always trust us we're doing this for you for what's best for you it's hard to feel that be true if you feel that you're not Hur at all in that process so we need to pull parents into it we need to start talking about it earlier in a truly collaborative way in which we're soliciting input before we make a decision and then we need to have more transparency about why decisions were made my we were personally affected by the restructuring of the preschool program at greenall into a Learning Center it was an inclusive program for 20 years and it's my understanding that we have changed the way we're doing that because of a technicality and so I I understand that we need to be in compliance compliance is very important it is a fiduciary responsibility of the school board to be in compliance but often times compliance is a minimum requirement is not best practice and so rather than shutting something down that has been good particularly this preschool inclusive program that was at greenall for the last 20 years I think we didn't ask how can we make this come into compliance while maintaining what makes this program so special and something that actually should be celebrated and expanded rather than shuttered um I'm so I'm concerned about like and then the message that that sends to families and I I understand because it sent the same message to me was that we don't care about this great thing that was happening we care more about compliance and those two don't have to be at odds so I hope that a lot of thinking was done into that and because I'm not a conspiracy theorist and I do trust that the district is trying to do what's best for all of our students I'm sure a lot of thought went into it but I wasn't a part of it and that's part of the problem is how can we include families and students and our teachers in a transparent way so that people think that they're contributing to finding Solutions and if ultimately maybe there was no way I understand sometimes that is the reality sometimes you can't find a solution but with transparency at least people would understand that and we just don't have that now and that's what we need to change

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?

I was challenged in 2022 to understand the historical context of board meetings and the way that our school board meetings function so I was challenged to go back and watch multiple years in the past of board meetings and I did I went and watched a lot of them we I'm grateful to have them recorded on YouTube I think what you'll see is that the pendulum has swung so before the current board was in place board meetings used to go sometimes until 2: in the morning and there was a lot of discussion that happened at the Das and some of that is great but also too much is too much and people aren't going to be able to follow everything that's happening and and now the board has swung the other way where oftentimes majority of times they all the vote is unanimous and there's not a lot of discussion and then when there is discussion it's just the positive things and um that doesn't feel right either so I think we need to come back a little bit more to the center but as far as the public participating in school board meetings I understand timing public comment and I think it does force the commenter to think about what really do they want to say and so I don't think it's inherently bad I think we need to move public comment back to the front of the board meetings and I think that as someone who has brought dream catcher families to the school board so that they can speak to the direct impact in their lives the families and the students and the volunteers I will tell you that we need translation services at school board meetings because they're inaccessible to those that don't speak English right now we need to move public forum back to the front as well as allow hybrid commenting either in person or on Zoom which thankfully we're doing again um so that more people can participate not less we need to have more clarity it doesn't feel good to go up during open Forum or comment on an agenda item and realize that you can't engage and a back and forth it's not your regular um it's not a regular conversation at a school board meeting I don't think the general public understands things like the brown act nor do they need to but I understand that the Schoolboard isn't able to comment it just feels like there needs to be some parent education about the types of conversations we can have and the way the public communicates at a board meeting and the way the board takes it in where they feel like if they do email their comments they're going to get a response or at least hand it off to the right person um with a gentle warm introduction to the right person that can actually help them so I think a lot can be done to make it feel both like a meeting held in public as well as a public meeting we can do a lot um to encourage participation and make it more accessible for all

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?

these are two great questions and I've actually already had a lot of parents come up to me with both of these questions um so I would encourage the parent to go to their site principal to their teacher to their um psychologist at their site and talk about getting them evaluated um in instances in which they feel that that's not possible there are other organizations like CHC where you can get an independent assessment um and it doesn't cost you money because that's a big thing is that some families can afford to have outside um professionals to pay them to do assessments and others can't and there are these services available um I think what's interesting and a Nuance to this first question is what about for those that don't have a principal yet because I get a lot of parents with very young children preschool

age and they don't know where to go and so they go to the district and there's a long wait to get evaluated and they're not sure when their students should start to get these Services they don't know about the preschool program for students with special services that happens at greenal so um in that case I've directed them to the district um but I know that sitting on that weight list doesn't feel great and so um I have been personally talking to a lot of student Advocates to understand what the timeline is so that I can talk to parents about what they should expect and what they need to advocate for unfortunately is just a lot of advocacy work that's required by parents especially parents with students with special needs and that's not fair and there are student Advocates out there that volunteer to help for free and know the requirements and can help them there are things like what Stephen Davis does where it helps educate parents there are a lot of organizations doing these things um I've gone to workshops hosted by real to which is an organization that has a founder and board members here in Palo Alto that's FOC focused on twice exceptional students and while it is very focused on twice exceptional students the education they provided for example on coming from a strength-based approach to IEPs as opposed to a deficit-based approach is important for us to understand not just for those students with IEPs but for students as a whole and certainly for what I think about with students experiencing the opportunity Gap so I think there's a lot of great resources out there I wish it weren't I wish it was easier for parents because we're asking a lot of parents and if you are you know a one parent household or all you're working more than 40 hours a week this all can feel insurmountable um this is something I want to change I want to make it more clear what can be expected what the timelines are and have somebody that feels like a student Advocate provided by the district walk people through this process which probably means hiring more staff and so I'd have to find room for that in the budget um but that's what I would advise a parent to do and I think there's a lot of room for improvement even in that process as far as what I would advise a parent whose child's been determined to be eligible for special education services but is concerned about using them often times they don't ask that's the thing these parents don't ask and I have met these parents that are just concerned about their child being labeled and about them getting sub par Services because they have been labeled and there's cultural stigmas around this and we need to do a lot of parent education to remove those stigmas and that's something we're actively trying to do with paleto Chinese Parents Club is provide information to our families that it's not a negative label it is what it is and it's about getting your student the support that they need and all students should be getting the support that they need we have a lot of work to do to shift the culture and feeling that special education students are stigmatized as someone who has um special education students that are now adults in my family I have cousins on both sides of my family that were high need I understand the looks that you get and so I I'm not trying to Gaslight any parents there's a reason why they feel there's a stigma because there is and so we need to do a lot in our culture to remove those stigmas so that it's really about uh and again with strength-based strength-based approaches to IEPs we need to come from a strength-based approach to everything and this is why again our inclusion needs to be focused around how do we create an inclusive truly inclusive environment we're not asking you to be different to fit in where we're making things different so that everybody does fit in

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 there are two questions within that one is on declining enrollment generally I am hopeful that declining enrollment will slow and in fact it will pick back up with the building of those 6,000 affordable housing units that the state is mandating us to build in Palo Alto I'm very

excited about that and I want to make sure that our schools are open and ready to serve those students when they come in and it looks like majority are going to come into South Palo which is where has been most affected by declining enrollment schools like Wab Bon is in Baron Park and so it's important for us to keep these schools operating so that they're ready for when these students get here um I also want to call out the fact that because of the way our district is funded because of how much money we raise through property tax declining enrollment has less of a fiscal impact because we don't rely on per student funding and so we are really privileged in that respect to not have to care so much about it in that way and I'm hopeful that it rebounds when you talk about the number of students with disabilities decreasing but at a slightly lower rate what I learned from that and from talking to families of students with disabilities is that Palo Alto is very much viewed as a place where you go to get better services for your students and although of course there are areas to improve I think what this points to is the fact that we can be that Beacon for other school districts about how to truly serve students with disabilities we have room for improvement families are flocking to us because we are trying to improve and so we need to keep it up

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 guess I think I've already gotten into this a little bit in my prior answers um there is a lot of discrimination against disabled people and children and as I mentioned I've seen it myself because I have family members with disabilities and our culture as a whole needs to change around this and what the school district can do I think think is lead by example and so again I think it goes back to what do we when we say inclusion what does that mean to us and how are we doing that and I don't know that we're doing it right we need to think about showing our children what empathy looks like in practice and it doesn't it's not surface level words it's not saying you're it's inclusion because your kids are there that is not inclusion there's a great video out there I encourage everyone to go to YouTube and look up double empathy there's a great video that talks about that and double empathy the idea that it's not just the surface level that your kids are physically there if they're disabled but it's how do we create this environment in which all of our students can thrive and feel that they fit in not that they're in this space that wasn't built for them um you see it not just I feel there are so many parallels to students with disability and the discrimination that they experience as well as our students um that are socioeconomically disadvantaged or that are students of color or students in historically marginalized groups we need to make sure our spaces feel welcoming and inclusive to them all the way through I and particularly I think and whether this goes to discrimination or not I think we should be leading the way in terms of talking about how can we make our schools Community Schools where there are wraparound services and people go for everything I think that that would do a lot to make people feel supported in all the ways that they need to be supported and perhaps would shift some of that culture away from a you're a different student to all of our students come here and have all their needs met

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 it's important to acknowledge and call out that the school board being a Schoolboard member is not a full-time job unfortunately and so there is limited time and we do have to fit this in while having

in my case a family and a full-time job and other things going on in life and so I think there you need to hear the parents but also create a space in which they can come you know whether that be something like office hours um or convening with groups of parents once they've grouped up to be able to hear them um I think also it's important to be able to help navigate them to the people that actually are going to be able to provide the right services and that's an incredibly powerful position that a Schoolboard member has that they have access to if they don't know the answer of where a family should go to get support they know who can answer that question I do that right now for our dream catchers families through directing them to resources because we have contacts at the district and so if I don't know who they should go to I find out and then I get them an introduction I think that's really important um and acknowledging there's only so much time in the day and so how do we make I will be constantly thinking about and refining how do I make myself available to be able to hear input from as many people as possible but still be able to make decisions and talk about larger level issues so I think it's a fine balance but to me hearing those things those micro level individual family level concerns when you hear enough of those you start to put the pieces together and understand how it affects and plays into these larger policy problems and so to me they're really part of the same ecosystem and equally important to be able to work on those larger things

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?

I want to close the opportunity Gap affected by all students included including students with disabilities as soon as possible but I also want to be realistic so I think it's important what I think was really great for example about the every student reads initiative was that our different areas of disproportionality those marginalized groups which include special education students were called out and then individual goals were set we well exceeded the individual goals which then what that means to me is someone who has done a lot of goals setting and particularly goals in terms of managing teams and managing individual people on teams as having run a company and run large teams was that if you well exceed the goal you probably didn't set a high enough goal you're actually capable of more and so I would push for us to set those Higher Goals because you don't you rarely go above and beyond if the goal and you learn to meet the goal so we need to set higher expectations so that we get to those higher levels faster I am optimistic again that if we put the right resources and the right charge behind something that we will do what we need to do to get it done and again to use the every student reads initiative as an example so one of the things I would look at is what are those other things we need to apply this model to I do think we need to apply it to suspensions because that is a huge problem and disproportionality disproportionality abounds in that problem and so what I'm excited about is that I participated as a community partner in Lana Conway's equity and Excellence Alliance this last year where they brought in specialists in culturally responsive and um restorative justice programs to talk about how we can immerse that into our culture and I think some of the schools are changing the way that they look at this so I think that we should we should continue that model and talking about how can we change our policies to address the intent of suspensions um because it's not serving what the intent is now the intent is for us to have less issues with our students but removing them from school isn't necessarily the answer or helping them learn how to behave better or and perhaps even it's an issue

of whether they're being properly supported and the expectations are appropriate that we hold for them so I would do things like that where we get these group of stakeholders to come up with how do we change our policies and and how do we continue to shine a light on these issues and the disproportionality that exists and then looking at specific areas that we can Target with initiatives like every student reads to try to close the opportunity Gap experienced by so many of our students

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?

what I've learned from watching two years two and a half years of school board meetings in the room during those meetings I've only missed two and then I watched those on YouTube um is that as a Schoolboard member you're 10 of 5 you're not the president you don't get to come in and say these are the things that I'm going to achieve because even if you did come in and say that and we all the candidates now have priorities and you should read about those priorities because they show you what our values are and the things we want to push to do you are one of five and so the most important thing the the way you can best achieve your goals and the way I will do it is by working with the other the other school board members there are five you all have to get behind it even for you to get staff to want to work on it every it has to be a priority of the board and you are one of five so I don't know how I'll tell you to measure it but what I would like to be able to show in four years is that I was able to work with those others that I was able to hold their hand and walk them through understanding why my priorities are the right priorities and the ways that they can line up behind them to help me push those things forward because that is what a truly good leader does they don't dictate with a heavy Fist from above and say this is what needs to be done and you have to do it they get people on board they influence people to understand why they're doing what they're doing and in my case because I believe that all my priorities are actually focused around uring that all of our students can reach their full potential and can Thrive both in school and Beyond to me I believe that it is an easier Road for me to convince the other four school board members that they should they should also support the things that I'm pushing and the priorities that I see because it's good for all of our students but what I'd like to be able to say when I come back in four years and do this forum is look I told you these are my priorities I don't know what specific things will do towards those priorities but I want you to see progress in all those ways and what I will highlight is the way that I was able to get it done by working with the rest of the school board to make it happen and and there will be majority of the things you won't even see because it will all happen in these relationships and in this way that you show why what you think is important is actually important I know I plan to be elected and I will work with whoever is elected alongside me as well as the two current school board members and whoever comes in after them in two years um whether that be that they return or are replaced and one is Turing off I am I am experienced and capable in working with people that don't always see eye to eye with me it's something that I have been doing my whole life is building bridges and it's something I'm prepared to do and we have qualified candidates this time around I am feel very confident that I be able to work with whoever is elected alongside me

Would you like to share some closing remarks?

thank you so much for having me and for listening to my answers to these very important questions I I want the voters and families to know that one of my top priorities the only priority that I have this time around that I didn't have in 2022 because I didn't understand that it needed to be called out but it does is that I want to earn trust in order for me to get everyone working together to do things like close the opportunity Gap improve mental health and wellness which requires us shifting our culture of pressure and stress that's experienced by students we all have to get behind these things we all have to

feel included in this process and like valuable contributing members to this community and so the one priority I didn't think to list two years ago that I know is so important to say is that I want to earn trust and I hope that I've proven today that I really am focused on ensuring that all of our students are reachable to reach their full potential and feel supported and valued for who they are and able to thrive both in school and Beyond because when you know that I care about all of our students you're more likely to be able to feel included in what needs to be done in our district to move forward it will not just take five members on the school board I believe it takes everyone feeling that they trust that we're all working towards the same things that benefit all of our students and so I hope you've learned a little bit about me and why I'm running and the ways that I want to engage with you because I do and I plan to be one of your next school board members I hope I earned your vote 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