

# Rowena Chiu Candidate Interview for Palo Alto School Board

by Steven Davis of DisabilityAlmanac.com

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<https://youtu.be/6GtG73Cssvs>)

## Opening Remarks

Hi my name is Rowena Chiu and I'm running for Palo Alto School Board I have four children here in the district and they were in 10th grade at middle college seventh grade in JLS connections and then I have a fourth grader and a first grader at Alony elementary school where I've been the PTA president for the last couple of years I'm running for school board on a platform of improving mental health of special education and on data transparency and I have a huge concern about each one of these issues.

*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](https://disabilityalmanac.com/p2024) again [disabilityalmanac.com/p2024](https://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?**

the single biggest accomplishment which kicks off my website is to say each child must grow and by that I mean I hope that the school district I we move the school district to a place where it meets the needs of each child in the district I have four children in the district they are incredibly different Learners and I would like to see a school district that serves uh children with diverse needs and that might mean diverse needs on the mental health front it might mean diverse needs on a special education front and simply even in terms of AC academic advancement each one of my children and each one indeed each one of the children in the district have different needs in that area and so I'm looking for a district that serves the needs uh of diverse children I my family have been very much involved with Choice programs and I think one of the benefits of choice programs for our family is it allows children who've come to school with very specific quirky unique situations um the autonomy and the space to really be themselves and to thrive

**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?**

from the very few conversations I've had with people who have children in um The Vocational and postsecondary programs um I understand that there is much work to be done in this area I will admit that it's an area that I don't know a great deal about and I'm still doing some research um the only tangential experience I have in this area is I was involved with a vocational and postsecondary program in London and what I would say about that program is um it allowed for a diversity of parts I think there is a lot of focus in palal on going to college some might argue too much focus on going to college and I would like to see um the district uh offer viable options to go many different paths in life because it's possible not of course it is possible I I can't believe him even saying this but it's possible to go to college and um not to go to college I'm sorry and still have a very successful fulfilled and thriving life and I think that is a message that somewhat lacking in this District because of an over focus on College in the program that I started in London um because I'm I was originally a filmmaker we taught um children in the U in that particular part of the UK who were not College Bound uh vocational skills such as DJing um music making uh record recording and film making and so I was involved with that program as a professional in the film making industry and I thought it was very inspiring to have uh people at Mid level in their various careers uh come back and show um these uh young people who are kind of eager to get a start in life that there are many ways in which uh we can walk a path and each one of us were thriving in our careers we really loved what we were doing and it was very Hands-On work so I I frequently got Secondary School students who told me I can't sit anymore in a classroom and learn about English and history and math that's not relevant to me but I want to make a film about a subject that I'm very passionate about and so for me it was very fulfilling to be part of that program and I hope for the students that participated in our program over the years that we did it um it was also fulfilling for them and so this is a vision that I would love to bring to PAUSD um if I were able to do that

**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?**

I think this this is a great question I never thought about running for school board and it certainly very much is a big decision um I mean for me personally it was of course my foray into local politics through um aloney room 19 you know I H have to say that although each one of my children had had different issues within the school district I hadn't done much in the way of a more holistic advocacy role uh prior to aloney room 19 and for those who are not aware of that background it was when a decision was made last February uh to close uh room 19 at aloney which was alone's Learning Center and then because I was PTA president at the time um a number of parents in room 19 uh asked me to consider stepping forward to Advocate against the closure of that room which they felt was a big loss for themselves personally and also for their children and we made the argument that um in closing alone's Learning Center we were depriving a protected group that is uh mod severe special education uh uh children that participated in mod severe special education from a very distinct um form of Education that could be found through aloney as a choice program as a lottery program and there were many specifics about aloney you know that that room 19 Community wanted to preserve for their children and also for future mod ofe children I.E access to the farm a less structured environment a

school that doesn't have bells or grades or homework and where the teachers are known by their first name I think a number of parents felt very strongly that the aloney education system um was a distinctive but B particularly distinctive and beneficial to mod severe students so this was a very specific issue that I advocated on um and this got me involved in local advocacy um I had a ground swell of support from the parents through this particular issue and I suppose you could have called it the straw that broke the camel's bag in the sense that that inspired me to step forward into a bigger role in local politics

**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?**

I'm a big proponent of inclusion classrooms and I'm very sad to see that Trend in pal I don't think it is helpful either for the neurodiverse community or the neurotypical community that we now see less inclusion in Palo it makes me very sad um my first experience was an inclusion classroom was more than 10 years ago uh through the fours uh inclusion classroom that was taught um at greenell uh through PreSchool Family by teacher Marian and teacher French and I will say that my own child who is a pretty quirky child even at the age of four you know incred you know benefited incredibly from having a a range of diverse classmates of that being uh a very inclusive and um welcoming environment of um you know diverse set of Learners a diverse way of engaging with the world um I always argue that uh there's a lot of diversity in the workplace that generally D workplaces corporate workplaces need be uh inclusive um because we need different skill sets we need different Minds to solve a corporate problem and so I don't see why classrooms should be any different and so I push really hard for inclusion classrooms um I I felt in advocating for aloney room 19 to remain open I felt that it would be a great loss to a looney to have less of the mods of kids spending a certain percentage of their time in a neurotypical classroom I believe that it um benefits both sides um so whilst I don't have a full and transparent understanding as to why inclusion is um is becoming less in paloto I do see that Trend and um it's something that is of concern to me and sadness to me

**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 think there's a broader issue about transparency of information and of data um I see a concerning Trend where um there are um inform you know there are uh there is data I suppose that um is not exactly hidden but it's not exactly widely publicized and so I think um this sort of more generally speaking goes towards this transparency issue in the sense that um it would heal the relationship between the parents and the board if uh the board were um more open about um its reason for making decisions and and that's a very general comment that doesn't pertain specifically to maths but I do want to come on specifically to maths um obviously it's a very contentious issue it's also an issue where my family have been specifically involved in the sense that um I have a child who's very math focused uh that she sat and failed both the sixth grade and seventh grade math tests and then wanted to go on and do what they call the Geo jump so between 9th grade and 10th grade sorry between 8th grade and 9th grade she took summer geometry and UC Scout geometry so that she could move on to algebra trig in

9th grade so during that time when she was considering jumping geometry over the summer I talked to a lot of families whose children had done this and I said well you know do you think it's a good idea um where where do you think the district is with maths and so on and I've continued to talk to a lot of math families about this since um I think and again I'm not privy to the reason why the district made these decisions and people have um you know very many different views about the def issue or the question of you know eighth grade students failing I think a simple response is that people think that over time the academic um agenda on maths or the academic curriculum on maths has gotten more and more complicated um as uh you know with Rising academic standards and um that ch um children eighth grade children in this District feel more and more pressure to advance in mass and therefore um they simply you know there's a school of for thought that says they simply can't keep up um I'm not really sure that that is the case um you know it is really concerning I think there's a wide range of skill sets within a math classroom and I think clearly we're not meeting the needs of middle school and high school students when it comes to math um as controversial as it is I would like to see the district look again at its Del laning policy and whilst I understand that laning is controversial I wonder whether some middle ground or um compromise could be considered around uh flexible grouping uh restoring confidence in math skills um looking again perhaps at the elementary school math curriculum to think about the extent to which base skills are um are are well taught in our elementary schools because I feel that there may be a situation where some of those basic skills in elementary school are lacking and that's slipping through the cracks so that there's no foundational skill when um kids get up to Middle College uh sorry middle school I should say

**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?**

this is another area another Trend I would say that I'm finding um discouraging and um pretty sad I would say I think um you know research has shown that punitive um measures especially at an elementary age uh where as you say children are too young to really make rational decisions you know their their uh frontal cortex isn't really fully developed um I think that this that that punitive measure of being out of school um is is really uh rooted in shaming and I think that that is unfortunate and unhealthy for all children uh let alone special ed children um who perhaps already feel um disconnected with the classroom uh I think more time outside of the classroom uh isn't going to really improve their confidence and their willingness to be in the classroom when they return and so I think this is an unfortunate Trend that I see um and I would very much like to push for a Banning of suspension for children this young as well

**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 will admit that I thought that um there would be more relevance in what I've done politically so far which is very irrelevant to this District I think um you know I've so far been a global advocate for a very specific issue um and um I was very surprised that that that the skill set for that Global advy campaign really wasn't at all relevant to coming onto Schoolboard I thought there'd be more

transferable skills about that and actually there aren't uh instead what I have done is um had to had to be had to really be very humble and in a learning position and as you say talk to very many people and learn about the issues that um people are concerned about for this District um I think another thing that has perhaps been less of a surprise but still is something I'm learning about is that people across the district are concerned about things that might clash with one another this won't be a surprise to you but it is a surprise to me in the sense that there isn't cohesion around a few key issues and in fact in one day I might talk to two or three or four different people who would advocate for a very different approach to exactly the same issue so uh one thing that I've learned I didn't I guess I didn't learn that from scratch but has been brought home to me is that as a politician even a local politician you can't please all interest groups because a lot of those interest groups are actually pulling in opposite directions um but I think this has encouraged me to look more deeply at what my own position is on that issue and to uh develop the confidence to push against someone who perhaps has been working in that issue for long and that is um that has been an a skill set that's been surprisingly difficult to learn

**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 there's been a situation where there have been a number of very contentious issues being brought before the board recently teacher pay of course being only just one of them which has um you know damaged the relationship between the teachers and the board um there's also been that the issue of violence against teachers of course which was saddening for everybody concerned um I don't think it's only teachers that feel disenfranchised um obviously um um many high school students felt disenfranchised about Advanced acceleration uh math acceleration I should say um and parents of course have felt disenfranchised about many issues which isn't something that's new I think in terms of rebuilding relationships between the board and teachers and parents and students um I think that we uh should think about heralding a new era of a listening relationship I think um as we had discussed earlier the issues sometimes aren't about what is what the actual policy themselves as in what is done about a particular issue um but it is about how the the district and the administration and the board go about communicating their decisions about a particular policy and the implementation of that policy rather than the policy itself and so I think uh I think some going back to the drawing board is required and thinking about um how decisions are communicated do does the board and administration appear to respect teachers parents and students are they involved in decision- making is uh the maximum autonomy given to them in terms of their children's education I think there's a a big feeling that teachers have lost autonomy in the classroom that parents have lost autonomy over the children's or over their own children's um educational experience um there are concerns about flight towards private school a draining from the public system the most engaged parents leaving or not wanting to fund the district and I think if we can turn some of this around and create a a listening partnership where parents teachers and students alike genuinely feel that the board is on their side and will listen to the things that they're concerned about and even if they are unable to do anything about them in a practical way will offer at least a respectful explanation as to why these things are happening happening I think that might go a long way towards improving communication and lessening the sense of disenfranchisement um that's currently happening in the district

**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?**

well similar to my answer to many of your other excellent questions um you know I've been watching some of these Trends with some dismay without truly understanding why these decisions are being made we ask the questions but we don't seem to get an answer that's necessarily that satisfactory um and I think one of the reasons that I was Inspire to run is I was often being told oh but you can't possibly understand what's happening or the pressures on us to make these sorts of decisions and I suppose that if I'm lucky enough to gain a seat on the board I hope to gain some insight into why these decisions are being made I think I return to the other point in the sense that perhaps a decision is not necessarily a bad decision per se but the way it's being communicated and the lack of transparency around the reasoning for that decision being made uh disenfranchises parents students and teachers and it is a trend that I would like to reverse so for instance you know let's go to something very specific which I was involved with last year if you talk about the reduction of Elementary Learning Center sites from 7 to 5 in 201 23 this may have been beneficial for the students that are moved but the cost of moving the personal cost of moving was so huge for each family I feel like um we as a community and certainly they as families deserved a better explanation as to why it was being done even if we agree with the eventual outcome the path to that outcome is important and the way that that is managed is very important and so um the second part of your question what do I intend to do about it is I hope that if I were lucky enough to be on the board um a greater fairness and transparency and improved communication will lessen some of the pain around transition that in particular special ed children seem to have to make a great deal um it at once seems harder well I me it once is harder for um children from this particular Community to make a transition to make a move you know they uh special special EG kids certainly my own special egg kid often struggle with transition so it seems deeply unfair that they at once experienced transition with more struggle and they are as simultaneously asked to transition more than neurotypical kids so for the families I'm close to who I've seen their children move from sight to sight uh seemingly every year and sometimes even within a year um you know I think that obviously this is a huge challenge to having our special a community uh truly integrated serving the community well uh having them be inclusive in classrooms and thriving and a lot of these goals don't seem to be met well by these constant transitions both in terms of site and in terms of teacher

**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'm constantly being told that the second isn't possible um I think it would be ideal if uh the participation by members of the public were seen as truly a discussion of equals really a public meeting where the public can come um as you say a critical part of the proceedings to explore new topics and

explore uh to to raise new topics and explore agenda items you know where the public has come and attempted to raise topics explore agenda items I've seen that they are very eloquent uh and they have uh good things to say uh both you Steve about special ed or math or kids high school kids that come and advocate for Better Math uh or or multivariable calculus you know obviously any engagement with the public I think is incredibly valuable I think the public because they are frequently the people themselves that receive these either these specialized services or would be the direct beneficiary of Better Math of multivariable calculus they can argue for these things uh very eloquently and so I think and and indeed they are the very people that the board is looking to serve um and the people that voted for the board so I think uh an atmosphere where there's respect for uh diverse opinion and that diverse opinion is brought to the board and argued for cogently uh respectfully and is permitted to be in the room uh would be hugely beneficial instead what I see is I do see this trend where the public is principally the audience and I think there's no better illustration of this then when you come to a board meeting uh with many things to say about a topic you feel passionately about and and you're given two minutes or just one minute and you're frankly cut off before you've even had a chance to really um raise an issue that has great Nuance I think that this uh more than anything gives the public the impression that the board isn't particularly listening and doesn't particularly value your opinion but it's merely paying lip service because it allows you this minute or two to to cram in all your complicated thoughts about an issue that is directly affecting you your child or your family I think it's a great shame that that has taken place I've been told many times you know that's an issue of practicality to keep these board meetings running because so many people want to come and speak uh but I would really encourage a revisiting of that because I think it doesn't communicate the idea that uh voters in the room and members of the school district either students or parents and or staff that teach within that District are truly respected and their opinion isn't brought to the table on an equal level to that of the board members whom they voted in

**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?**

it's an issue that is very personal to me because I had a long journey and a great struggle to get my own child assessed for special ed education services within the district um and then even after my child was indeed determined to be eligible for special head Services um I feel like it's a constant road to advocacy um I don't uh you know parents have been coming to me for advice about this even without being on the board and I I really struggle with this because I think it's really hard to um come up with a a positive and an optimistic narrative about it I think it is a long road of advocacy for your child I would argue that each parent has to be the best advocate for their own child because they know them best I think things don't fall off a tree in this district and perhaps not in any school district uh special ed services aren't given to you on a plate I think that you have as a parent have to Advocate pretty hard for your own specific child's needs um and I think you have to have a lot of confidence that you know that better than the district um I think it's hard because a district pushed back against you uh I think that the district hasn't been uh good to special ed parents I think there's been discussion oh they you know they're too they push too hard they're snowflakes they they demand too much and so on and so forth um I don't think that's true I think as a parent myself of a special ed child I think I have worked hard to advocate for her needs at every turn and I would encourage other parents to have confidence a that they know their own child best be that they are going to be the best advocate for their child

**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?**

if you are elected there are some that argue that the decline in school enrollment is uh you know purely due to the demographics of the area in the sense that the town has become very expensive to live in it is mainly now an office town for Tech workers to come into so office space is overtaking residential space and that people are moving out of pal palto certainly is a town very expensive to live in uh I think young families are tending to choose neighboring towns um where the housing is better uh and perhaps services are better for younger younger children and so this is uh unfortunate for PR USD because it's always held this reputation for being an excellent school district and I think obviously funding goes if if families move out um but also I think it's difficult to kind of keep a grip on its reputation for Excellence um as enrollment declines so um I I think it is going to be very difficult to do anything about the holistic demographic situation in the sense that as housing prices rise and as uh young families are moving to uh East Bay and and even North Bay uh or San Jose over pal I think for the school board to change that demographic trend would be difficult but I think that there are specific areas where the board may be able to reduce some of the flight although not entirely um you know for instance in the area around the flight to private school um my understanding is that a number of uh families that continue to live in Pala uh despite the the high cost of housing in paloto and the excellent School District the supposedly excellent school district have ended up uh you know sending their kids to private school despite having paid for a house in palto because they wanted to participate in the public school this is a specific area that I think we do we can do something about and I would say I think it starts with listening to those families who live here but yet have gone to private school why isn't this uh Public School District meeting their needs and how can that be different

**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 that this purely comes down to education I think the loss of inclusion classro hasn't helped loss of inclusion classrooms especially at an early education Early Childhood stage because um children are their very young children um their ideas are less fixed they're much more fluid about diversity uh in all senses uh to do with race to do with special education to do with gender and I think that um you know I'm very much an advocate for using inclusion classrooms at an earlier stage in um education uh particularly in childhood education um because I think it um gives young children very young children a sense that uh not all people think the same not all people look the same and I think if we can incorporate inclusion classrooms at an earlier stage and then have them consistently work through the elementary middle and high school stages um I think that this um education awareness but also just opportunity to be in a space where people work differently and think differently I think this would help a lot in terms of discrimination uh which primarily stems from a lack of awareness and a lack of Education

**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 would say that as a PTA president I hope that my uh the the families I worked with would say that I was very available I think now in this age of social media it is uh hard not to be able to track down a person and so on a very practical level I was available by phone by WhatsApp by uh Facebook every other kind of social media so I think as a PTA president um parents at alone were able to find me um I generally like talking to people and understanding their concerns with the district and um you know I one-on-one coffees were both as a BDA president and now as a a political candidate a very effective way of really talking to people face to face sitting down one-on-one I think that's very hard to beat uh of course that is a huge burden and a Time suck but I think it's part of the role of somebody on the board I think it's part part of the role of someone even on the PTA the second part of your question though about navigating between individual issues and larger policy problems um I think that's a concern even when you are simply a member of the PTA um because invariably parents within your school Community will argue very hard for their own particular child situation as they have every right to their own particular child situation their own particularly family situation and I think bringing all of those diverse issues that sometimes Poland different directions into a policy problem um is a challenge there you know I have to be honest and say I think that's a challenge it was a challenge when as a PTA president I expect that to be a challenge if I'm ever a board member um I want to draw an illusion from my professional life uh I work with the governments of many African countries and we try to uh develop policy across vast geographical regions like East Africa or maybe even the continent of Africa itself and yet within Africa there are countries at very many different stages of Economic Development and so it's really about um having the vision to see what is the greater good for the largest number of people and I think that that as a principle applies both to when you're addressing economic problems in Africa but also when you're trying to solve uh with limited means limited resources um find a solution for the greatest number of children of students of teachers of parents within the district so it's a balancing act there's no simple answer to that it's taking the time to listen to individual issues and then having a vision to come up with a holistic solution that benefits the most number of people without being afraid you know there will always be people who are dissatisfied with the solution but I think you can sleep well if you have um tried to find a solution that works towards the greatest number of people

**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 think we've already discussed the issue of suspensions and so my policy position would not be against suspensions uh partic the young especially for younger children um I am very concerned about the performance Gap I think the district is not serving our special education children well um uh I draw that both from uh my work as a PTA president advocating for an entire group of uh modav children but also in terms of my own personal experience with my own child whose needs often haven't been met

by the district um so uh my goal to close the performance Gap would be to uh go to uh the families who are most in need who um are most uh we're failing uh the most in the sense that um looking at information about suspensions looking at information about children who um are not attending school for one reason or another um and and uh really asking those families to speak to why why they feel the district isn't serving their needs at this time how quickly do I want the district to close it I would consider this to be a top priority for me um I speak about mental health and special ed um as two of my top goals um and I think that those goals are actually connected in the sense that obviously if the district is not serving special ed children their mental health suffers the mental health of their parents suffer and the mental health of those who teach them suffer

**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?**

in four years I started this interview talking about every child must grow um and I think that that idea that every child should Thrive within the district um is particularly um relevant to the special ed Community um I my concrete goal would be that um instead I came into the district at a time when the the district was failing special ed children that there was a flight from here to private school particularly for the special ed Community um and we were able to reverse that specific Trend and offer uh palatable serviceable uh in fact thriving um services for the special ID community and that would be I'd be incredibly proud if we got there in four years

**Would you like to share some closing remarks?**

I am really honored to be in this position of running for school board I never thought that I would be here but I think I've learned a lot in a small amount of time and if I'm lucky enough to continue to serve the district I would love to do that to the best of my ability um I have chosen to run on a platform of of mental health and special education because these two areas uh deeply affected my family in the path that my children um took through public school um and I um and I understand that they are areas that of great concern to many within this District um and so I hope to um build this platform so that we can make a more collaborative uh Kinder and more transparent environment for parents um students and teachers within this District.

**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](http://disabilityalmanac.com/pa2024)**