

Transcript of Questions and Answers from the Special Education Parent Working Group 2021 Board of Trustees Candidate Forum:¹

Candidates and attendees, we welcome you to the 2021 Special Education Parent Working Group Candidate Forum for the Eanes ISD Board of Trustees' election.

The Special Education Parent Working Group (SPWG) consists of 10 parents whose students receive special education services in Eanes ISD. The committee is selected to reflect the district's special education population's diversity in terms of campus, disability, and instructional settings. You can find your campus representatives' names in the link that we will post in the Q and A. You are all invited to reach out and connect with any representative.

A bit about us: the disability community itself is perhaps the most diverse of all communities. We are composed of economic, religious, cultural, ethnic diversity, and people of all races and colors, and disability itself represents a widely diverse set of experiences composed of physical, cognitive, sensory, mental health, and learning disabilities. As a result of this inherent complexity, the disability community is representative of the entire continuum of human experience. Due to this intersectionality, our community has a strong interest in the Eanes community's direction regarding issues of social acceptance, educational equity, and the creation of a positive school climate where ALL students belong, are valued, and are seen as an integral part of the Eanes community. Next is Rosa Burns

The SPWG is pleased to partner with the Arc of the Capital area to use the zoom webinar format as a platform for our Candidate Forum. For more than 70 years, The Arc of the Capital Area has provided individuals with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities (I/DD) training, education, and employment skills to become productive and contributing members of our community. We are thankful for the Arc's support and assistance with this forum.

Additionally thank you all for submitting questions, We used those to guide the questions here tonight. Candidates were given some questions in advance of the forum but we reserve the flexibility to add questions at the end.

We will have the Q+A open at the bottom should any questions come to mind as we go. We will keep the last 5 minutes to consider a few additional questions. All questions submitted prior to tonight and in the Q+A chat will be on our landing page at the ARC, or available upon request. We encourage all the candidates to respond to such unanswered questions.

¹ Time signatures are scattered throughout as they were provided to the SPWG in the transcript. No editorial commentary should be taken on where they are placed and nothing should be construed with respect to their placement other than that is what was provided to the SPWG.

Today we welcome Megan Oertel as our moderator. Megan has graciously offered to moderate this forum, and we are deeply appreciative of her time as well. So take it away, Megan.

Thank you. I am Megan Oertel and will be guiding our forum this afternoon. I have three children in EISD, two daughters and a son on the Autism Spectrum.

Welcome to our candidates who are seeking election to the Eanes ISD School Board of Trustees. We appreciate the opportunity to be with you this afternoon. We have with us: James Spradley and Nigel Stout, who are on the ballot for Place number 4; and Jennifer Champagne and Jen Stevens, who are on the ballot for Place Number 5.

We'd like for our attendees to have an opportunity to get to know you. Would you please take 1 minute to introduce yourself and let us know what your hopes and aspirations are for the special education community moving forward, particularly in light of the Stetson audit, the impact of the global pandemic, and the steps the Eanes community has made concerning the DEI initiative. We will go in alphabetical order by last name for the introductions and start with Jennifer Champagne, then James Spradley, then Jen Stevens, and last Nigel Stout. Ms. Champagne please start with an intro of yourself.

INTRODUCTION OF CANDIDATES (zoom recording started after candidate's introductions)

Moderator: What do you think are the biggest challenges that kids with special needs face in SPED. And why do you think equity, as opposed to equality, is so crucial to the special education community. How did you reach these conclusions? Mr. Spradley will start with you. Thank you.

James Spradley:

I think the biggest challenges that kids with special needs face is getting individualized focus help. This is at the heart of the difference between equity and equality. Equity involves looking at each child as a unique being with individual unique needs. Then working to provide the help required to meet those needs and more parents want their kids to be successful and achieve great things. These are amazing kids, and we need to focus on them as individuals and provide them the tools they need to succeed. Through my years of volunteering in classrooms I have seen this help firsthand. Our special education staff members are wonderful and love our children. Often the work they do rises well above what would be considered normal duties. They do this work because it's a passion.

Unfortunately, the biggest challenge to providing this help is tied to budget shortcomings of our school districts and many other faces Texas school funding model. We are a property rich district that has sent over a billion dollars to the state to help fund other districts. Don't get me wrong, I support funding public education in Texas, and we all benefit from helping educate children across the state. But our legislators are not even keeping up with inflation when it comes to funding schools. We need trustees who have a deep knowledge of the Eanes ISD the budget and understand the trade-offs that have to be made to meet our budget challenges. We owe it to ourselves and our children to elect trustees who can manage the budget, and keep resources in our classroom, our most vulnerable children need a budget that allows us to provide services that go beyond equality, to providing an equity-based approach of meeting individual needs. Thank you.

Jennifer Stevens:

I believe in the equity of opportunity. We need to focus on meeting our special education kids where they are and helping them achieve their individual best. Some, promoting the DEI agenda would have us believe that children need help based on what they look like. And I think that's wrong. The diversion of engaging and expensive DEI consultant from New York only siphons away resources from our special needs students. Our special needs students need resources that they're typically developing peers do not require, attracting and retaining qualified and properly trained staff is an absolute necessity. And our biggest challenge for both the teachers and aids, parents tell me that another significant challenge is communication with the administration. Consistency and communication are the biggest challenges facing these families in speaking with my friends who have students in special ed. Eanes has slipped. I commit to working to get us back on track so that we can be a leader in special education again. These students have individual learning plans that are tailored for the individual needs. Our district and staff should meet those needs. I have several close friends with special needs children. Down syndrome, to twice exceptional. We talk about these issues often, and we were especially close in touch as they struggled through the pandemic lockdowns. They all relate their challenges and the recommendations to me. And I listen. And I learned from them. Thank you.

Nigel Stout:

You know, I think the biggest challenges for kids and special needs right now, you know, what I would say, better identifying kids that actually need services, giving them the tools and the strategies to help them grow and thrive and make them feel equal by including them and accepting them for who they are. Our special needs kids face insurmountable challenges that typically children, a typical child I should say, do not face. On the first page of this STETSON report, they stated that quality service for students with disability requires a strong belief in shared ownership and responsibility for all learners, a high level of collaboration among all stakeholders, respectful ongoing communications between all parties, resulting in increased levels of trust. In addition, equity in service delivery for all students is a necessary precondition for excellence within a school district. Now my son with autism has spent most of his life feeling misunderstood because his brain doesn't work the same as other kids; you cannot always read facial expressions or body language to clue him in on how others, other people are taking something that he says, or do I having qualified and highly trained teachers, we can learn strategies, or he can learn strategies to help them overcome these issues, giving him accommodations and strategies is the key for him to serve to survive and thrive. How do I reach these conclusions? By studying the issues and by living them. We need to treat everyone with the same equal worth, regardless of what they look like or seeing different at the same time help those that need help to succeed. I think most special ed kids just want to be liked and fit in. I can tell you how many times my family would be at a restaurant or an event that people will say things mean to us, or nasty because our son was behaving like he had a meltdown because he was in sensory overload. People can be very unkind, and maybe it's time for parents to model inclusion to their children by teaching patience to others not automatically assuming the worst about others. Thank you so much.

Jennifer Champagne:

Thank you. Um, one of the biggest challenges I think, as Mr. Spradley says, is being able to provide individualized instruction to every student that needs it in our district. And one of the biggest challenges we faced in Eanes ISD is attracting and retaining highly qualified special education teachers. There is a nationwide shortage of special education teachers.

We've had positions for teachers and for TAs that we've had difficulty filling. Our IDEA is not fully funded by the federal government and HB3 during the last session ensure the other districts can pay their staff more than we can, and this will continue to compound going forward unless the legislature changes the formula. (17:22:20) And I said this in the last forum as well, and equality is giving everybody the same thing, equity is giving our students what they need. It's critical to our community that we bring together diverse groups of kids into all situations and that we meet every student where they are to provide the best outcomes for students who received special education services. This is one of the reasons that as a trustee I promoted and approved the DEI initiative and that we added DEI as a priority for our district. I wholeheartedly believe in inclusion and it should be an essential part of our district. (17:23:03) I think this is essential. And I'm committed to that work. Thank you so much.

Moderator: Second Question - Students who have a disability in one of 13 broad eligibility categories qualify for special education and receive an individual education plan, commonly referred to as an IEP. This document helps staff and families agree on goals that students need to master and unique supports and services designed to access and make progress in the general education curriculum. Every student in special education receives specially designed instruction to address their disability. An IEP is not a standalone plan. Three broad issues impact many students with an IEP: access and measured progress in an appropriate curriculum; frequent and meaningful progress monitoring; and post-secondary outcomes. How do you propose to monitor the progress of kids with special needs, other than by IEP goals? Ms. Stevens we'll start with you.

Jennifer Stevens:

Thank you, Megan. I had the chance to get some feedback on this question from my friends who are special education parents as well as speaking with a special education teacher, and excuse me and it's my understanding that we're lacking in this area and it's a real challenge. Special Education parents tell me that the district has no consistency and testing and measuring successes, which makes challenging situations, all the more challenging for parents. Special Needs Parents need consistency and communication from the district, as I try to work with their kids and understand the areas for needed academic improvement. I also know that a few years ago it was suggested by special education families to hold our district more accountable to ensure that these students will

learning to the maximum potential, not just physically attending school to check a box. I'd like to revisit this idea and have these conversations again so that we can have meaningful assessments in place that are individually appropriate for each student. That is going to take a partnership with our experts in special education, our parents, and a proactive board.
(17:25:15) Thank you.

Nigel Stout:

Have a tangible benchmark. Benchmarks, testing, to continued feedback on progress of the student's achievement, with parents, not just at an ARD. Parents should have constant communication with teachers and special ed workers, so that they can reinforce what has been taught and work on areas that need improvement. For my family over the years communication has been key to achieving my children's IEP goals. For example, when our autistic son was struggling in middle school, we reached out to the case manager to set up communication plans so that we could keep an open daily dialogue with special ed teachers and our son, for us, that was our having to write an email every day during his social skills class to us and CC his special ed teacher, telling us what work he had done that, or had to do that night, or if he struggled with the behavior that day and we could help him better when he got home. It kept us abreast of what was happening at school and it made him more accountable for himself. It didn't add to the special-ed teachers' workload since our son was the one writing the email. I think communication with our special ed, especially children seem to be key. Having an IEP meeting annually isn't going to keep abreast of their progress. We want to ensure that his team at school, knew that we were part of that team as well. And if we needed us to reinforce something that were going on at school that day, and we could just send me the quick note, email, for us to call and be sure to reinforce it when we got home, my son, who has dyslexia and ADD was struggling and his 504 was an inadequately meeting those needs we communicated that with the school and met with them to create an IEP for him on-going communications is key. Parents need to feel like they're part of the team too.

Jennifer Champagne:

And we need to do a better job of making sure our students are successful and prepare for jobs or college when they leave. We've hired and trained

case managers and continue to hone their skills through professional development. We have reworked our Student Support Services team to best serve our students and have put a bigger emphasis on transition planning. Our case managers monitor progress daily. But at the board level, we can ask for stronger outcomes and monitor our students gaining greater access to post-secondary education programs as they expand across the country. COVID 19 is admittedly slowing down this process, and I'm looking forward to the continued progress we can make in this area as we move forward. Thank you.

James Spradley:

I think of an IEP like a blueprint for a building. It's a document that lays out basic structure and a plan, but it only represents a basic outline of the work that is needed. There is much more to completing the project and simply building to the plan. Executing to and beyond that plan is the real work the best plans fail, unless acted upon effectively by all who are involved in the work. I think monitoring progress on an IEP has to be an ongoing team effort. The team begins its work with an accurate assessment of the child. Like the survey or who visits and measures the site for future construction, we need professionals and parents to come together and properly assess a child needs. It shouldn't be a battle, but a cooperative effort. As a professional project manager, I know that those who fail to plan, plan to fail. Once created the plan needs to be worked through a cooperative effort, like the construction of a new house, all of those who work on the project have to be aligned on the work and the desired outcome. The team working to meet the commitments of an IEP and more needs to be aware of the goals, and frequently revisit them. We need to review a child's IEP often, and certainly more often than annual reviews, to focus on the work. We need to ensure we are helping the child, according to the plan, and more. I am a strong advocate for looking at the individual child, and providing an equity-based approach of meeting those individual needs. I have proven this through my actions and my first term, and will continue to do so, if reelected. (17:29:57)Thank you.

Moderator: (17:30:00) Thank you. Next question. Some people believe that students with disabilities should not be in public schools. For example, students all present with what others referred to as behavioral challenges. All students experienced behavior, but students with disabilities often have behaviors that are manifestations of their disability and when appropriately supported and

adequately addressed, they can be successful. (17:30:24) What are your views on this and how does it fit your definition of inclusion and the promotion of a positive school climate?

Nigel Stout:

(17:30:42) Did you I'm sorry can you repeat that question I was visiting there, sorry. Absolutely.

Moderator: (17:30:47) Some people believe that students with disabilities should not be in public schools. For example, students that present with what others refer to as behavioral challenges. All students experience behavior but students with disabilities often have behaviors that are manifestations of their disability and when appropriately supported are adequately addressed. What are your views on this and how does it fit your definition of inclusion and the promotion of a positive school climate?

Nigel Stout:

I think students with disabilities should be in public schools, you know, my family has lived this for many years. We have a son on the autism spectrum, who has sensory processing disorder. All throughout elementary school and middle school his behavior, could be considered challenging, at best, the slightest noise or change in his routine could set him off and even using his best strategies, he wouldn't be able to recover His school prior to us moving to Eanes was not equipped to handle these challenges, and at times encouraged us to look at other options. We chose to move to Austin, and into Eanes because of their exceptionally school, and their special education program. We believe and inclusion of all children, especially those with special needs. (17:32:03) Blended classrooms, teach children how to see each other as different, but equal all children have the same worth special needs children thrive being around typical kids and typical kids can learn so much from their classmates, with special needs.(17:32:20) They learn compassion, tolerance, empathy, they learned that our differences are what makes our society unique and special. My son, because he was in mainstream classes, and was appropriately supported by his ed team throughout elementary and middle school is now thriving in high school is learning strategies that help him cope with his emotions and impulses, so that now we have very few issues with his behavior. (17:32:49) We have so much

to learn from each other, and what makes each kid unique inclusion of special needs children, only makes our classroom, better, a better place. Our children will become better adults for it. (17:33:02) Thank you.

Jennifer Champagne:

(17:33:09) Public Schools for everyone, period, public school is for everyone. We support every student who walks through our doors, no matter their ability, no matter their background, no matter their economic status, we support every child that walks through the door. This is what distinguishes us from many private and charter schools. By meeting the needs of a student where they are building relationships and making school a good experience for every child, we can create a positive school climate where everyone can thrive for both the student and their peers.

(17:33:46) This will foster an inclusive environment. For example, we need qualified experienced special education teachers who know how to educate and avoid unwanted behaviors, through high expectations.

(17:34:01) This is yet another example of why I'm committed to diversity, equity and inclusion and why we need to focus on it in our schools. Including all students, together with their peers will foster that inclusion and understanding. (17:34:16) Thank you.

James Spradley:

(17:34:20) I believe students need to be in an environment that leads to the best outcomes with respect to their education, in the least restrictive environment. Students with disabilities should participate in public schools, unless it in some way impedes their education which is probably pretty rare. (17:34:38) I've been in classrooms and involved in extracurricular activities that includes students with disabilities and these are enriching experiences for all students. I don't condemn parents to make an individual choice to keep their children with disabilities from public schools or general classrooms. That is a choice they feel is appropriate for their child, and I trust in parents to understand their child needs. Having kids involved in the classroom is my definition of inclusion. I believe it truly promotes a positive school climate.(17:35:13) Thank you.

Jennifer Stevens:

(17:35:18) All children are entitled to receive a quality public education.

I spent years volunteering with and working with the Rise school Boston. The Rise school integrates typically developing kids and special needs kids in an environment that allows both to thrive. (17:35:35) One goal is to see the kids who leave their preschool, integrate into public schools. (17:35:40) I completely support special needs children being in our public schools, because the typically developing children learn from their special needs peers, and vice versa. In fact, my daughter has been a student helper through elementary and middle school and she found her experience and those friendships gain to be so influential in her life. There are examples when a mental or physical illness impairs a child such that it disrupts the safe learning environment. And we should consider how we can attract and retain, well to attract and retain well trained teachers and aides to come work with these children in a safe way. I have friends that have special needs children, and behavior is one of their biggest challenges. Parents often spend thousands of dollars on applied behavior analysis and weekly transporting from various therapies. Our district needs to attract and retain and attract and retain properly trained staff with tools for behavior support. When these students have behavior support their individual need for their individual needs. (17:36:49) This makes both the parents and the students more confident in an inclusive setting with their traditional learning peers. Thanks.

Moderator: In 2019, the Board of Trustees commissioned the inclusive culture committee much in response to parent concerns around bullying. Some feel that this has not translated into tangible improvements for many students receiving special education. In 2020 we saw the district broaden its commitment to other marginalized students' populations through its diversity, equity and inclusion efforts. Still, it does not appear that disability is among the priorities of this endeavor. (17:37:35) What is your experience with inclusion, integration, exclusion, and segregation. And what do you think our school district can do to increase the sense of belonging among all our students with differences related to ability, race, or otherwise.

Jennifer Champagne:

(17:37:53) The intent of the DEI committee has always been to increase the inclusivity of all students. While this committee focuses on enhancing racial awareness, initially, our goal is to improve access and increase belongingness of all students, including those with religious, gender identity, cultural, and ability differences. This is a work in progress. You've heard Dr

Gooden say that this is not microwave change. We've revamped as far as our, our special ed community we've revamped the Student Support Services team and move staff into new positions to better serve students. (17:38:36) The progress was slowed by COVID 19. And this was one of the reasons we offered students receiving specialized services, the option of in person schooling first, if it was the right decision for their families. I expect to see great things coming for the students from the support services team now that we're moving beyond COVID19 and the pandemic. (17:38:59) There's a lot of work to do in this area. And once again, our DEI focus is broad, and it focuses on including all children in our schools and making sure that they feel safe and have the best outcomes for themselves. Thank you.

James Spradley:

(17:39:20) It saddens me to think that there are those who do not include students receiving special education services in the diversity, equity inclusion and inclusion work by definition that's not inclusive. I personally have never made this exclusion in my mind and I hope this is simply a misunderstanding and not a practice by any DEI group. (17:39:39) The question asks about my experience with inclusion and integration. When I was a scout leader for elementary aged kids we had a child with special needs wanting to participate in our group. We welcomed him to our patrol. (17:39:52) His mom talked to us about how we could best serve her son. (17:39:56) He became a full-fledged and important member of our group. One of my favorite things about the scouting program is that it measures children on the standard of do your best.(17:40:07) That's equity. Well most children did the advancement requirements as written, I was able to look at individual performance and measure a child by doing their best. This meant that the whole group could continue to progress together. This and other experiences, taught me that children with special needs are amazing, have a lot to offer and need to be included. It taught the children in the group that we can all bring special skills and ability to the team. Inclusion makes us a stronger team. I have a special place in my heart for the best buddies program at the high school, I believe every child does better in school when they have friends belong to a group. In elementary, this is easier because the classroom unit becomes the strong group and upper grades, this is more difficult. (17:40:57) Well, I love the work of the best buddies program. This is one part of a bigger solution, full inclusion is when all children are welcome and find homes in all groups from football

to robotics to band, to Student Council. More than accommodating, these groups are best when they are welcoming and inclusive. I have and will continue to advocate for inclusion of all children.(17:41:20) Thank you.

Jennifer Stevens:

Personally speaking, I've worked in support of the Rise school mission and the ARC for years. In fact, I have a piece of art in my home that was painted by a very special and talented artist. DEI programs, absolutely must include special needs children, and they must prioritize special needs children. It's wrong to generalize or stereotype. We must stop stereotyping and get back to treat to treating each child as a unique individual. And that means, especially focusing on the needs of our special needs kids. (17:42:00) I know several people that were on that committee, and if I recall it was led by Todd Washburn and Molly May. COVID hit. Todd moved to another district and Molly got promoted and the grip organically dissolved. DEI must include all students all abilities, all skin colors all perspectives, period, special needs students should not be excluded from the conversation, and in fact they need to be our highest priority as these students were born with developmental disabilities. There have been reports of bullying a special needs kids and have gone largely ignored by this administration, and that's wrong. (17:42:37) The emphasis our district places on differences in people will only divide us. Conversely, the more we educate on special needs, the more our students can learn from one another. We should consider how to expand student helper programs and elementary and middle school, and the best buddies program at the high school and communicate to all families that these are available. I firmly believe special needs thrive and typically developing Thank you

Nigel Stout:

For what you just said, everyone can clearly see that the current board has failed to make this ability a priority. But in 2019 the commission of the ICC but failed to make any real strides and approving and stopping bullying. (17:43:27) I know this because my son and his friends with IDD are still being bullied, and it's 2021. (17:43:35) So what do you think is going to happen now that they have expanded their commitment to other marginalized groups with DEI, and the hundred and 70,000 Plus, New York consultant, without implementing special ed? Where are the

resources going to come? From special ed, not on my watch. (17:43:56)
What is my experience with inclusion integration exclusion, and segregation? And what do you think our school district can do to increase a sense of belonging among all students with differences related to ability race or otherwise. The exclusion part I have lived firsthand through my son, and what he has gone through. He has been excluded from school events, kid's birthday parties, sports, all because he is different. I attended Los Angeles Unified School District, one of the most diverse districts in the country. I had classes where there are probably 15 different languages spoken by kids in the class. I have friends from all races, color, religious backgrounds, and socio economic backgrounds. I never chose my friends based on their race or anything else that they had no control over. I chose friendships based on things we had in common, their character, and our mutual interests. What we can do to increase of belonging in our district *is* have more accountability. We have policies already in place, that means every student has to sign student handbooks before entering school yet, when incidence of bullying happen, we rarely see the administration fall through with disciplinary actions on bullying. Again, this topic hits home. Thank you.

Moderator: Next question. Even before COVID-19, the prevalence of mental illness like severe anxiety, depression, OCD trauma and bipolar disorder among youth was increasing yet eligibility for special education for categories such as other health impairment and emotional disturbance was diminishing. Meanwhile research reveals that youth living with intellectual and developmental disabilities IDD experienced trauma at a higher rate than their non-disabled peers, but received little to no health education or social emotional learning. Our district appears under equipped to support these students with mental health issues. What is your commitment to serve mental health issues among our students?

James Spradley:

I like this question, and it's important to me. I can assure you the board is committed to handling these concerns, our children have faced a lot of trauma, over the last year due to COVID, and many other things. We face budget challenges that may limit what we can provide. But this is an important service for our children, that must be supported. (17:46:31) To answer this question directly I am deeply committed to serving mental health needs among our students. I don't think this is specifically a special education topic. We need to ensure these resources are available to all

children who need them. I'd like to give you some insight into one of the biggest strengths of your board of trustees. You the voters have done an excellent job of building a strong team of Trustees, and I'll share why I know this. There are hundreds of complex things, a board has to understand an advocate to promote and protect from special education to school finance to classroom safety to curriculum to 100 other things. If each of the seven trustees attempted to have a deep knowledge in each of these areas we would fail. We would end up with seven trustees with a shallow understanding of everything instead trustees bring different passions and depth of experience to the room. At least one trustee for example has a child in the other health impairment or special education category, having this trustee in our conversations gives us the ability to go much deeper on this subject. (17:47:45) I know I can call on this trustee to help me when I need to know more. Your current board isn't perfect but it possesses a special working relationship that consistently proves to benefit our children. Be careful about the possible impact of electing people who promised to drastically upsets this delicate relationship. I am committed to working with our community teachers and administrators to understand the needs and to fulfill them. Thank you.

Jennifer Stevens:

I'm very thankful for the question. Not long after the lockdowns began last spring, the son of a family friend of ours committed suicide. Our family was in shock, as we mourn him. I looked at my own kids and I knew that we had to do better. And I knew we had to start pushing to reopen our schools. This board will tell you that they had a plan but that is a lie. They were paralyzed in fear and politics. After parents were polled and we said we wanted to return, just a couple weeks later, Dr. Leonard wrote a letter to the governor and said parents did not want to return in direct contradiction to the will of our district. Our students with special needs are our most vulnerable student population. They need consistency routine and structure more than most. And I was so glad to see that they were among the first to be admitted to school September the eighth at the 25% mark. If they chose to do so. I believe where there's a will there's a way. We have to lead with courage. We have to prioritize the mental health of our kids. That's why I led the fight to open the schools. That's why I organized to raise money for PPE for our teachers' mask gloves microwaves whatever they asked me for. I did whatever I could so we could reopen safely. And I also reached out to Dell Children's Medical

Center, and I secured the mental health symposium for our district. Dell was ready to have that conversation in September and yet the administration, and specifically my opponent who was the designated point person to get it done. It didn't happen until December. We have resources in this community, and we need to use them. I think that we have resources in this community, and we need to use them. I think that we need to prioritize the mental health of our kids, our teachers and our families to tackle the challenges that we faced in COVID and beyond.

Nigel Stout:

(17:50:18) Yeah, I totally agree. It's incredibly frustrating. Again, this hits home for me. I have a kid with a final four (*sic*) because he suffers from severe anxiety disorder, with panic attacks. (17:50:30) I believe the United States as a whole has completely dropped the ball on mental health issues. And we need to completely revamp the way we help those kids, dealing within school. From personal experience a 504 is not enough to equip kids with mental health issues. Remote learning only amplified these issues for children suffering with mental health issues. I saw it in my own home. My son went into a deep depression, which is why I, along with Jen Stevens, pushed so hard to get our kids back in school, CDC data shows a 24% increase in emergency room mental health visits for children ages five to 11, compared to 2019. In adolescent ages 12 to 17 that increase is 31%. (17:51:22) Last summer, the CDC reported that one in four young adults had contemplated suicide in the previous month, and that's not even adding 2021. This is unacceptable. I believe children with mental health issues should qualify for an IEP. I believe they need counseling services to teach them strategies to deal with their anxiety or mental health. In our home we're able to afford our son to have a therapist to help him. But there are many parents out there that don't have the luxury of their children were suffering. Each child that is dealing with mental health issues is unique. They don't all have the same symptoms or reactions to issues. Therefore, they need an individual education plan. They need support in the classroom. For many, like my son, it's embarrassing when he feels a panic attack coming on all at school, he feels stupid for not being able to control his body. Many times, he doesn't know what is even triggering the attack. So how can you manage them if he doesn't understand what causes them in the first place. I commit to you that I will champion this cause in our district. Our focus needs to be on equipping all students for success in and out of the classroom. (17:52:30) Thank you.

Jennifer Champagne:

Nothing's more important than the safety and health of our students. Nothing is more important than that. I served on the district's School Safety Committee starting in 2019 and worked alongside our school safety and risk management director, our school resource officer superintendent and a doctor who serves on our school Health Advisory Committee along with others. One of the primary focuses of this group is exactly this to address the mental health and suicide prevention of all students. We continue to focus on this through continued monitoring and partnership with teachers, staff, and case managers. The Board of Trustees, has long championed social emotional learning. It's been a district priority for many years. We've recently added diversity, equity and inclusion, because we see the impact that the lack of inclusion cause on our students, the lack of inclusion that affects their emotional ability or their emotional well-being. And we focus our resources there for a reason. We focus resources on diversity, equity and inclusion and on social emotional learning, because it's vital to the safety and the well-being of our children.(17:53:57) Thank you.

Moderator: Thank you all for that. And in the interest of time, I'm going to take a question from the Q & A submitted by the attendees now. As parents of students with disabilities.(17:54:12) We believe in the inherent value and promise of a free appropriate public school education for all children, including being educated at their home schools. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act guarantees that students will be educated in the least restrictive environment and in a regular classroom to the maximum extent appropriate. Some candidates have mentioned that homebound would be a suitable service delivery model for students with disabilities instead of continuing with remote learning next year. Please speak specifically to how homebound would address the right of students with disabilities to be educated in the least restrictive environment.

Jennifer Stevens:

Well, I've referred to homebound as a model of what should be expanded as opposed to continuing with virtual. We've asked our teachers to do the impossible teaching both online and in the classroom. I spoke to a teacher the other day that told me she barely has time to even go to the restroom. (17:55:10) She has to answer any questions in the chat while trying to

answer questions in the room, and it's not a recipe for success long term. In the instance where we have medical necessity and the children need to be more studying and doing school from home we have a system in place with homebound services. Does the system that exists now meet the exact needs that we would need it to meet? I don't think so. But I think we have a model we can build upon. I think we have a structure we can then tap into. And as James said earlier, we have experts on the board who can come together and put together a plan, so we can meet the needs of our special needs children who rely on homebound services but adapt homebound to be able to meet the needs of any medically sensitive children who may need to remain in virtual learning. Thank you.

Nigel Stout:

(17:56:04) Yeah, so you know I have special needs kids and they were struggling with remote learning it just wasn't working for them, you know they don't have immune compromised systems, I think the reference to the homebound or homeschoolers were for kids that couldn't come to school potentially because of immune compromised systems. I think most, if you talk to Special Needs parents, they were struggling like I was to get their kids back in school. I think it's unfair to have our teachers work double duty on doing in class and remote, they're going to be some kids that are going to be exceptions and I get that. I think we need to look at what we can do that's an existing program like homebound or partnering with the homeschool that we can actually provide services to these kids and not interrupt you know our regular teachers, trying to do their, job so I'm up for solving, problem solving this isn't the only district in the country, I'm all about best practices, we can find solutions, I think we just need to identify it and make sure it happens. Thank you.

Jennifer Champagne:

(17:57:19) Last summer, my opponent did advocate for all children to be in school, immediately. On the first day of school, with no masks, with no social distancing with no regard to quarantine policy and encouraged zero remote learning with disregard to the needs of individual students.

(17:57:47) The solution that she proposed to provide homebound services to anyone who just didn't want to come to school was inappropriate. There are qualifications that allow people to be involved in homebound education, and they're pretty strict requirements. (17:58:10) It's just, it

shows a complete lack of understanding of the system. It also shows a lack of understanding or budget to say that we should just provide homebound student services to anyone. It also completely shows a lack of understanding of FAPE. We have to provide a free appropriate public education for every child, and that means making it as equitable as possible. For some children and some for some families coming back to school in September, was not possible was not the right choice for their families and for some families, particularly some that are highly sensitive, with their health conditions, it's still not appropriate and they still have their children at home. I respect the right of every family to choose what's right for their family. And that's why we, as a board focused on getting our children back to school safely, we prioritize our students with who needed special education services first, and that was the right thing to do. Thank you.

James Spradley:

I'll keep it pretty simple I think first of all I would start with the individual needs of the individual child. I don't want children all together I would never say all children need to do, ABC that's, that's not where we are. (17:59:34) We need to look at the individual child and meet them where they stand and fulfill their needs. I'm aware of some 2E kids who are doing really well with remote right now. And if that's working really well for them. I would really like to see us be able to continue to provide that to them. (17:59:54) You mentioned homebound and I think that that's appropriate for some children but again go back to the individual child I don't want to sit here and make blanket statements. My biggest fear with respect to offering remote education is that the state will probably come in and the TEA will make some blanket statement that says, we're going to cut off your funding if you don't go 100% in person. I know that's going to cause a lot of angst for people and I'm sorry about that but that'll be the state coming in and making that call. I believe that every child in Eanes deserves an Eanes ISD quality education, and we need to look at the individual child, and provide that to them. Thank you.

Moderator: (18:00:40) Next question. (18:00:42) The US Department of Education found the State of Texas to have imposed an illegal cap of 8.5% on special education eligibility when the national average is around 14%. Federal law makes schools responsible to identify students ages three through 21 that need special education services. For years, Eanes ISD has hovered around the

cap and this year reported that 9.4% of students needs special education services. Why is there a large gap between the gains percentage of students and the national average? What should be done to close that gap?

Nigel Stout:

(18:01:20) You know, I'll be honest, when I first read this question I had never heard of an illegal cap. I reached out to the SPWG and asked if they could direct me to where I could learn more about it. (18:01:32) Thank you, Mara for sharing the Houston Chronicle series "Denied" with me so I could better understand this issue. The illegal cap is a big issue that frankly goes beyond Eanes, it affects every student with special needs in the state of Texas. (18:01:49) It is a way for the state to put restrictions on school districts and penalize them if they go over the cap. Eanes along with many schools in Texas, are at or are below the national average because of TEA has set up a system that discourages school districts from testing and evaluating children who may need special education services. (18:02:13) The TEA system increases the number of kids going into alternative services or programs like 504, for instance, or private therapy as a way to keep the special education eligibility at or near the illegal cap. (18:02:26) They have encouraged children with a IDD like my son with, who has autism, to move from an IEP to a 504 plan, which would give him far fewer services reclassifying these children would be incredibly harmful for them, and the success rate, we see now would surely decrease my son could never have survived school with just a 504 plan. We like so many families in Texas would have had to pull him out of the school district and look for alternative options. As a whole, nationwide, there are more and more children in need of special education services, which could be in part why the percentile has increased for Eanes this year, along with the effects of COVID on our children's mental and emotional states more children need services now than in the past. (18:03:18)Thank you.

Jennifer Champagne

(18:03:21) Thanks. Absolutely. The state definitely imposed an illegal cap and has been fined for this. Eanes ISD accepts every student who walks through its doors, we continually strive to identify students who need services at an earlier age Section 504 is a civil rights law, and that simply provides accommodations, in my opinion, it's important for staff to work

with families to decide if they need more than accommodations, rather than just the default 504 plan. It's important for families to understand that with IDEA and special education, they have more rights under the law, and they can receive both accommodations and modifications if they choose. (18:04:08) Also having an IEP allows the district to gain more funding under our weighted system of average daily attendance in Texas, right or wrong, that's the way it's done. And it's important to note that IDEA has not been funded fully funded by the federal government. In early 2020 I traveled to Washington DC as the National School Board Association representative for our school district to advocate for full funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. And this is an area we need to improve on. We see differences even among campuses on in our district of the level of identified students, and it's something that we need to address and we need to find the source of the discrepancies and move forward. Thank you.

James Spradley:

(18:05:01) I'm a numbers guy. I look at numbers professionally. I see percentages as indicators of something more. We need to look at the numbers, but we need to focus on the children that make up the numbers. Just because we meet or exceed a number doesn't mean we're perfect, nor that we should stop reaching for more. Falling below to me the national average doesn't necessarily mean we're failing our children, but it tells us we need to ask more questions, so we're sure that's not the case. The heart of this question is whether Eanes ISD excluding children from special education, whether accidentally or maliciously. (18:05:40) Either way, if we are systematically excluding children from special education services. We need to stop. I've heard from parents who have told me how difficult it was to get an assessment for their child. Some even sought outside help with the district couldn't or wouldn't accommodate their request. (18:05:56) I have a problem with that. Once assessed I've heard parents' concerns about how difficult it was to come to an agreement plan. (18:06:03) I'm not saying this is true in every case, I've heard from several satisfied parents in this respect. For those parents who have had these challenges. We need to do better. Our children deserve more. (18:06:16) There are several bills working their way through the current Texas legislative session that need to be watched closely for their impact on our special education community. Some of these are good, and others concern me. One for example would make it more difficult for people with

disabilities to vote. (18:06:34) That's unacceptable. (18:06:36) I understand the heart of this question, and low relative percentages are real concern. But let's not focus on the percentages at the expense of focusing on the children. Let's look at children individually and work to meet the individual needs of all children. (18:06:54) After all we owe it to these amazing kids. (18:06:57) Thank you

Jennifer Stevens:

I think there's a number of reasons why Eanes might have a lower average, including proper teacher training to identify and properly diagnose special needs in our students, working to remove any negative stigma of having a child identify the special needs, and we need to examine whether our district is categorizing kids as 504, instead of special needs and an effort to provide less expensive accommodations that aren't meeting that child's needs. We should audit the district's process of identifying students to qualify for special education services and find out where the breakdown occurs. (18:07:37) There are several recommendations made in the STETSON report to get our district back as a leader for special education students. Yet, this board has not made substantive changes. I believe that we can do better. Thank you.

Moderator: There is now an emphasis on transition services for students with disabilities due to data indicating poor post-secondary outcomes nationwide. Eanes mandatory reporting to the state suggest the same and is confirmed by the Stetson Special Education Review. (18:08:14) This review provides numerous recommendations to address this issue, as a board member, would you:

- a) Publicly stated that you are committed to educational excellence upon graduation for all students, including those with disabilities;
- b) Would you commit to implementing the Stetson recommendations and provide regular reporting to address the gaps in achievement between general education and special education students;
- c) Will you commit to a study on the outcomes of our special education graduates and how well Eanes is achieving the stated purposes of IDEA?

Jennifer Champagne:

Thank you. (8:08:51) Yes, absolutely. I can commit to all of these things.

While I can't speak for the whole board on a study, it's something that I would personally like to see happen I would like to see more data on outcomes and opportunity for all students to be successful. (18:09:06) After completing their time with Eanes ISD. We need to review the Stetson plan again to see what's been accomplished and what remains to be done. (18:09:15) Like DEI, this is not microwave change, we need to give our staff time to accomplish goals, but we also need to continue to monitor progress. This is why the current district improvement plan that's under development that will be voting on I think to meetings. (18:09:47) Also includes goals for addressing the recommendation of the special ed program review and the inclusive culture committee. So, yes, absolutely these are things I'm committed to. (18:09:48) Thank you.

James Spradley:

My answer to this question is easy. Yes, Yes, and yes. Let me start right now. I am committed to educational excellence upon graduation, for all students with disabilities. I am committed to implementing the recommendation made in the Stetson in Special Education Review and providing regular reporting to address the gaps and achievement between general education, and special education students. I am deeply committed to understanding the outcomes of our special education graduates and how well Eanes is achieving the state of purpose of IDEA. Thank you.

Jennifer Stevens:

Yes, to all three. I commit to focus on educational excellence for all of our students. For special needs students, we should look for partnerships with organizations like our host here tonight. The ARC, who can work with our students and their families to create job training and placement opportunities as well as provide other important support services. (18:10:56) I will work to ensure that special education students are provided educational experiences that build upon their individual strengths and recognize their accomplishments. I've heard from many of my special education parent friends that there is a dire need for consistency in tracking and measuring progress with our students and assessing their individual needs. (18:11:18) I would like to see consistency established, and we should absolutely be reporting on our successes and areas for improvement. I think the idea of a study on the outcomes of special education is a fantastic idea. As I have said, the number one thing I hear

repeatedly from my friends with special needs children is the desire to have consistency and transparency and measuring progress and success. (18:11:45) I know it might have been a sensitive subject in the past. But I think that the more information that we can give to our teachers and our parents who are working with our kids, the better. Thank you.

Nigel Stout:

(18:12:01) Yeah, I will publicly state and committed to educational excellence for all students with disabilities, this is obviously near and dear to my heart. Yes, I would be committed to implementing the many recommendations stated in the audit to address this significant gaps and achievement between general education and special education students, and provide special education community with regular reporting on the implementation of the recommendations. I would also add that I would like to see the SPWG to have quarterly meetings with policymakers, the current board is passing over a clear plan of implementation recommendations to improve special education to make DEI priorities for the district. C) Absolutely, I will ensure that special education students are providing educational experiences that build upon their strengths, recognizing their accomplishments and are consistent with the principles of self-determination, as if, as every special needs parent knows children do not fall all into the same box. And then for D, yes, I will commit to a study on the outcomes of our special education graduates aided by the eligibility and PEIMs code, so we can obtain objective data on how well Eanes achieves the stated purpose of IDEA. I've experienced this firsthand at our last IEP meeting for my son with autism. We asked about what Eanes had to help with his transition out of high school and into college, or the workplace. And I was told that Eanes didn't really have a lot to help in that area. Special Needs childrens don't just stop being special needs when graduating. (18:13:56) When the graduation comes, it's our duty to make sure that we have the resources necessary to make them successful post-secondary, we need a full time transition specialist to meet the needs of our special needs kids graduating from our high schools. We need to reinstate the Project SEARCH program and look into implementing new trade programs. Thank you.