



2022 MPS Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire

The Advancing Equity Coalition (AEC) has spent the last several months listening to and learning from MPS families, community leaders, teachers, and principals to help guide these questions. We invite you to fill out this candidate questionnaire to help inform voters about your plans to improve the quality of education for students of color and Indigenous students across MPS. Your responses will be shared with the Minneapolis community through our newsletter, website, and social media channels. AEC is a registered 501(c)3 organization. We will only use the information collected in this questionnaire for voter education purposes. We will not endorse candidates in this election.

Candidate and Campaign Information

Name: Sonya Emerick

Pronouns: any pronouns

Which Seat Are You Running For?: MPS School Board At-Large

Campaign Website: www.SonyaForMPS.com

Candidate Email Address: SonyaForMPS@gmail.com

Candidate Social Media Channels:

- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/SonyaForMPS>
- Twitter: @SonyaForMPS
- Instagram:
- Others:

Candidate Questions:

1. Why are you interested in serving on the Minneapolis Board of Education?

I'm running for School Board because I believe every student deserves access to public education. If elected, I seek to interrupt and deconstruct systemic barriers to that access.

Across metrics, from early intervention to transition services—babies to young adults—we are faced with devastating evidence that we are leaving Black, Indigenous, students of color and disabled students behind because we have failed to develop practices and policies to effectively deliver a public education to the diversity of our students in Minneapolis. Embedded in this systemic oppression are plenty of mechanisms meant to blame children for the unacceptable inadequacies of a system they did not create and do not have the power to transform, and to criminalize their attempts to engage as self-advocates for their educational access. I cannot look at racially disaggregated data for Minneapolis Public Schools—academic, enrollment, graduation, suspension, special education placement, and finally disenrollment—without seeing iteration after iteration of

violence. I cannot reflect back on the experiences of my own family navigating special education in MPS for my child with complex disabilities without revisiting the fear and helplessness I have felt as a parent, fully aware that the impact of the educational inequities my child has experienced will likely impact him for the rest of his life.

I believe fiercely that all students are engaged, motivated and skilled learners, and it is the job of educational leadership to remove barriers. I'm passionate about frameworks and practices that honor all student strengths, needs and identities as valuable and enriching characteristics of our learning communities. I'm committed to elevating student voice and developing our future leaders by giving our children opportunities to successfully lead today, particularly those disproportionately harmed by disparities and difficulties.

2. What skills, experience, and/or expertise do you bring to be an effective member of the Minneapolis Board of Education?

The personal strengths I would most enthusiastically bring to the School Board are those that I've developed in the face of systemic disenfranchisement and structural oppression.

I have spent nearly two decades parenting in poverty in Minneapolis. One of those decades, I was a single parent. My greatest skill relative to material resource management has and always will be the ability to make something where there appears to be nothing. I don't believe there is a more critical lived experience when it comes to financial management than running a household on MFIP and SNAP. My community organizing and service on nonprofit boards has provided me opportunities to develop proficiency in fiscal management of large-scale operations, where my skills for manifesting sustainable budgets translates well.

I am part of a household that experiences multi-generational disability. I am certified disabled by the state of Minnesota, and I have a child with the same designation. He is a rising first grader enrolled in Minneapolis Public Schools and began receiving special education services at age two. Advocating for educational access and inclusion for my child—whose needs are significant and global—has been exhausting and devastating. The education system is broken in so many ways. It is inequitable in so many ways. It is inaccessible in so many ways. Circumstances like these are one reason that part of the legacy of disabled people is the ability to innovate solutions for access. I believe I can bring this unique skill set to the School Board, along with my considerable knowledge of and passion for special education.

I am queer and transgender. I came out for the first time as a teen while matriculating through Minneapolis Public Schools. While attending South High School, I was heavily involved in and benefitted from LGBTQIA+ student support groups, school-based mental health supports, and other equity programming I needed as a queer student. As many states in our country face wave after wave of legislative proposals that repeal rights and endanger lives of trans and gender nonconforming children and adults, and as we navigate

our own local threats to the well-being of our students, it is important to include LGBTQIA+ voices and perspectives across leadership bodies.

In addition to the skills directly resultant of struggling and persevering as a multiply marginalized person, I offer particular strengths in the areas of systems analysis, relationship-building, and perspective-taking. I have experience working for equity and access with a network of community partners across public, private, and nonprofit sectors. I sit on the Site Council for the MPS school where my child is enrolled as well as the district's Special Education Advisory Council, and I serve on the Board of Directors for the Autism Society of Minnesota. I have been honored to provide training on strengths-based practices for supporting autistic students for Early Childhood Special Educators in MPS and at the state level through the Division for Early Childhood. I have experience as a street outreach worker for vulnerable children and young adults, a youth worker for minor parents experiencing homelessness, and a case manager for homeless youth in a low barrier shelter setting. My work and life experience have taught me the value of balancing conviction and humility, and I strive to equally demonstrate both.

3. The last three years of interrupted learning has only exacerbated Minneapolis Public Schools' nation-leading racial disparities in academic outcomes, leading to an academic crisis. What would be your top 3 priorities to address this racial disparity and improve the academic outcomes and experience for students of color and Indigenous students? What data and information will guide your decision-making in academics?

1. MPS needs to meaningfully and effectively implement its Climate Framework at every site and across stakeholder groups in service of dismantling racism and related forms of oppression in the district. It is both ineffective and cruel to expect that the kinds of significant gains students of color and Indigenous students deserve can be accomplished by children who are actively trying to survive oppression in their places of learning. The Climate Framework was developed in partnership with impacted communities via the Parent Participatory Evaluation process, but—in part because of Covid interruptions—still requires implementation with integrity, including measurable metrics, clarity about data and progress tracking, and transparency pertaining to effectiveness. It's time for leadership to commit to bringing our school communities together to co-create meaningful metrics for implementation so that every student, including and especially students of color and Indigenous students, have access to safe and culturally sustaining educational spaces where they have the opportunity to learn from well-supported, highly skilled educators who racially and culturally mirror them.
2. Students need to be in their classrooms, with their learning communities, in order to gain the most benefit from their education. We need to stop over-using and

inequitably using exclusionary discipline (any type of school disciplinary action that removes or excludes a student from their usual educational setting) and segregated special education placements to systematically remove students from their learning communities as a result of institutionalized racism and ableism. If our schools are not set up to teach the diversity of our students, that's a structural problem, not a result of student deficit. I support the practice of listening to our students when they tell us what they need, and supporting their self-advocacy and agency. We can do this in asset-based classrooms and learning communities where we know how to create belonging and provide the array of services and supports our students need to excel and thrive.

3. Every student has limitless literacy learning potential. Students require and deserve literacy instruction that is both evidence-based and culturally sustaining. All our students need educators and administrators who believe they have futures worth protecting and preparing for. In MPS, we're facing a crisis pertaining to equitable access to science-based literacy instruction, and our collective belief gap is still creating unacceptable literacy disparities for many of our most underserved students. We need to address both our instructional practice, and the dismantling of our embedded culture of underestimating BIPOC students.

As far as data, standardized testing gives us one view, but not a complete picture. We also need to be looking at data related to Special Education Federal Setting 3 and 4 placements disaggregated for race; enrollment and graduation rates disaggregated by county system involvement; and student mobility to and graduation rates from Alternative Learning Centers disaggregated by race. We should be gathering data generated collectively by sites like the number of students receiving literacy intervention outside the classroom, using a goal continuum or similar tool. I also believe we should increase student voice at the district level to receive the expertise of our learners, and better utilize mechanisms for student self-evaluation and educator evaluation to expand that source to as many MPS students as possible. Student feedback should be weighted equally to other forms of feedback.

4. One of the biggest assets of Minneapolis Public Schools is the diversity of families the district serves. However, students receiving English Language Learner services often have some of the worst academic outcomes in the district. What actions will you take to improve the academic quality and educational experience for students receiving ELL services?

MPS needs to utilize Culturally and Linguistically Sustaining Pedagogy in order to address educational access inequities and belief gap barriers experienced by multilingual students,

and these practices must be used with all students, not just students receiving ELL services. Monitoring for efficacy and need for adaptation should be conducted by those from the impacted communities, whether MPS staff, parents and families, community partners, or a mix. Additionally, the MPS Board of Education must partner across the State to apply pressure to the legislature to close the ELL Cross Subsidy so that we can fully fund these important services.

5. Given that we are in a child and adolescent mental health crisis, what key policy changes or investments would you make to support the wellbeing of MPS students?

My first and most immediate intervention is to normalize a culture of believing students. We must treat students as trustworthy self-advocates if we want them to consider partnering with adults in educational and related systems to address mental health conditions and impacts of trauma. Students are also experts about site-based strategies to support student well-being and should be helped to implement their own ideas as frequently as possible, regardless of whether they are unconventional.

Our MPS Mental Health Institute, headed by recently-named Minnesota School Social Workers Association's 2022 School Social Worker of the Year Judy Brown, has tremendous capacity to serve our district's students with an internal team that can offer continuity and stability, as well as foster family and community relationships. We must prioritize investing in this program to protect team members from burning out and leaving the district, including leveraging outside funding opportunities and partnerships to support and compliment their work.

6. Teachers of color and Indigenous teachers are severely under-represented in comparison to the student population, with approximately 80% of the MPS teacher population identifying as white. Teachers of color and Indigenous teachers in the district report feeling isolated, experiencing a challenging work environment, and a lack of support. What strategies would you support to rapidly increase the percentage of teachers of color and Indigenous teachers in the district? What strategies would you support to improve the work environment for teachers of color and Indigenous teachers?

My first priority for question three, pertaining to racial academic disparities, applies here: MPS needs to meaningfully and effectively implement its Climate Framework at every site and across stakeholder groups in service of dismantling racism and related forms of oppression in the district. There have been some effective recruitment efforts that are in the early stages in Minnesota and will hopefully result in increased numbers of new educators of color and Indigenous educators down the road. However, the more immediate issue for me is retention. We have heard explicitly from BIPOC educators that in addition to the stressors most teachers are facing right now, they are facing additional issues pertaining to climate and culture, disciplinary practices, isolation, and mental health concerns due to racism in our district. Increased recruitment will not solve this problem if

we cannot provide educators of color and Indigenous educators with sustainable and affirming positions in anti-racist schools where they are supported to focus on teaching. Time-bound, specific, culturally relevant metrics to track the effectiveness of Climate Framework implementation pertaining to educator climate and culture concerns must be co-crafted with direct feedback from educators impacted by racism in our school system.

7. Despite nearly 20% of MPS students receiving special education services, the academic experience and opportunities for students receiving special education services is rarely discussed by the Minneapolis Board of Education. What key policy changes and investments would you support to improve the educational experience and quality for students receiving special education services?

Students receiving Special Education services are segregated in MPS in numbers that are both wildly unethical and out of compliance with the Federal Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Segregated placements create opportunity and belief gaps for disabled students and contribute to a pipeline to segregation, institutionalization, and incarceration in adulthood. Black and Indigenous students are significantly overrepresented in receiving segregated placements—those that pull a student away from a general education setting for 60% or more, and often 100%, of their school day—in Minneapolis.

I am strongly in favor of partnering with the TIES Center, one of the leading technical support organizations for school inclusion in the nation, which operates out of the University of Minnesota Institute on Community Integration. This is a partnership our students need and deserve.

Similar to addressing the ELL Cross Subsidy, the Minneapolis School Board must exert pressure on the state government to fund the Special Education Cross Subsidy. We cannot allow the state to fail to fund the federally mandated services required for equal access to education for disabled students. We also must have a plan for how to use those funds in a way that integrates students receiving Special Education services into general classrooms with the level of support they and their teachers require, and in ways that explicitly celebrate and value disability as a form of human diversity that adds value to our communities and carries a powerful history, narrative, and legacy that all students deserve to learn about.

8. For several years, the MPS Finance Department has said, “the current cost structure is unsustainable long term” and “enrollment increases alone are not the solution”. As a policymaker and financial steward for MPS, what changes would you consider to MPS’ cost structure to ensure MPS is financially sustainable into the future?

While I agree that the best enrollment increases we can hope for are not going to avert a financial crisis, I believe MPS pushes a significant number of students out of our district. I

know because I have experienced it with my child, and because I have spoken to countless caregivers and parents who have also faced this devastating situation. We need to identify and address the structural inequities that are causing student push out, particularly for BIPOC students, students receiving special education, and county systems involved students, including auditing the costs of segregated, ALC, and out of district placements for students we “can’t serve.” Minneapolis Public Schools being a viable and compelling option for every student in the city of Minneapolis must be a priority as part of our long term financial plan.

I also believe community partnerships are extremely important to the financial health of the district. I would ensure that MPS interacts with as many opportunities as possible for partnership across sectors in order to bring programming and services to our MPS community while outsourcing the costs. Hennepin County Educational Support Services is available to provide individualized supports to youth from households with county systems involvement, our county library system has an array of successful and culturally sustaining literacy support programs, the new Family Response and Stabilization Service provides low-barrier, immediate access to supports pertaining to youth mental and behavioral health crisis stabilization delivered by culturally relevant community partners without pushing families into unwanted systems involvement. MPS must leverage all resources for the well-being of our students and our budget.

I would expect organizing statewide to lobby the legislature to fully fund public education, especially by closing the ELL and Special Education cross subsidies, would be part of my job. I have testified to the legislature multiple times this year on behalf of this cause, and I would expand that work in partnership with my fellow School Board directors and the various MPS unions.

I don’t want to have to say what I think is probably true, that we will need to close some school buildings. I have a visceral reaction to it. If there is a way to avoid closing buildings, I will pursue it tirelessly. And, I believe grown ups need to make hard choices to protect our kids from bad outcomes. I would rather close buildings than keep feeding the school to prison pipeline brilliant Black students who fall through cracks so wide that they look suspiciously like systems.

What is important to me about the potential for building closures is that leadership finds a way to navigate us through whatever is coming in a way that is the least disruptive for the students historically most impacted by disparities, that doesn’t increase the number of racially isolated schools, and that we strive to be responsive, not reactive. I don’t think we have a way to get around the fact that we have tough years ahead, and we need leadership that is very clear about that and ready to take it on.

Please email your completed questionnaire to kenneth@advancingequitycoalition.org along with a headshot by Sunday, July 31st.

About Advancing Equity Coalition:

The Advancing Equity Coalition (AEC) is a coalition of organizations, working closely with MPS parents, educators, and community members, who have come together to develop the political will to eliminate institutional racism in Minneapolis Public Schools. We are driven by a vision that every student in Minneapolis Public Schools can succeed and deserves a high-quality education. With that, we are focused on ensuring the policies and conditions are in place for high-quality academic experience and opportunities for students of color and Indigenous students.

If you would like to learn more, you can visit our website: www.advancingequitycoalition.org

You can also visit our social media channels:

- Facebook: facebook.com/advancingequitymps
- Twitter: [@EquityMPS](https://twitter.com/EquityMPS)
- Instagram: [advancingequitymps](https://www.instagram.com/advancingequitymps)
- Youtube: Advancing Equity Coalition Minneapolis