

# King County Democrats 2024 Endorsement Questionnaire

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<b>What type of position are you running for?</b>
State Executive
<b>What position are you running for?</b>
Superintendent of Public Instruction
<b>Are you a Democrat?</b>
Yes
<b>Have you ever been a member of another political party?</b>
No

### Does your campaign have a code of conduct for staff and volunteers?

No

### How do you propose we fix the special education funding gap?

Our consistent failure to fully fund special education for every child that needs it is an embarrassment. Simply put, fully fund special education and ensure school districts have the support they need so every single child who needs access to special education programming is able to receive it. This is not an unreasonable objective. We are one of the wealthiest states in the nation, and among the fastest growing economies year after year.

The saying goes, show me a budget and I'll show you your values. If that's true, what does it say about our values that what amounts to a drop in the bucket in our annual budget is being used as an excuse to not live up to our basic values when it comes to fairness, equity, and supporting children with disabilities? With political courage and by bringing stakeholders together to set a strategy we can address this critical gap in our system urgently. Frankly, I'm not convinced we even have a choice. The current system is out of compliance with federal law, likely our own state constitution as well, and a failure of our basic duty, decency.

### How will your office develop a funding formula for public schools and capital projects that distributes funds equitably across districts regardless of tax base?

While leading a national nonprofit dedicated to addressing race and social inequities in education, I worked with education systems across the US to address their funding formulas. We found that states taking equity and social justice seriously spend about 30% more on districts with higher levels of poverty. Here in WA we spend about 10% less. Our funding formula is completely backwards and perpetuates systemic inequality. I believe that the state-level paramount duty must include capital projects. Politically the key is not to address this problem by cutting one district's funding down to give to another— but rather taking an approach that helps all boats rise. It's achievable but requires working diligently and urgently to restore voter's faith in our state educational leadership, utilize best practices from across the country, and make a case for how this funding system will close opportunity and learning gaps for our kids. There's broad consensus that this work needs to happen, but the status quo leadership at the top is getting the way. We need a fresh approach with the urgency to bring stakeholders together and tackle our most pressing challenges.

### What are your thoughts about how OSPI manages student and parent concerns regarding civil rights?

Serving as a reporting mechanism for civil rights complaints for students and parents is among OSPI's most important roles. It is first and foremost an agency that is designed to hold school districts, schools, and administrators accountable in a transparent and responsive way when they otherwise fail to protect students from bullying, bigotry, bias, and harm. Unfortunately, I don't believe OSPI is living up to the high standards it could achieve on this issue, frustrating many parents and students who feel their concerns continue to be ignored. I founded Equal Opportunity Schools, a national nonprofit that partners with districts in most US states to resolve disparities in school resources and practices. The choice in this race is clear. As the Seattle Times put it: where the incumbent "brushes past the complex issue of equity in education, Saaris has written an entire book about it." That book is based on a career of successful programmatic and policy work to resolve civil rights issues. Washingtonians deserve nothing less than our full and urgent attention to these issues – in a way that raises the bar and substantially enhances opportunities for students of all backgrounds.

### What oversight will you bring to homeschooling?

Especially since the pandemic, homeschooling is becoming an increasingly common practice with mixed results for our kids. States like New York and Pennsylvania proactively address this risk through regulations on homeschooling which I would consider. These oversight mechanisms include outlining the subjects that must be taught, requirements for assessment of student learning, auditing records of student learning, and qualifications for the individual providing instruction. The purpose of this system is not to punish parents or create burdensome regulation, but rather to ensure that everyone meets our state's requirement for students to attend public education or some learning that is meaningfully equivalent. I recognize that this would be a big step and how we design a system that brings transparent accountability to homeschooling should involve diverse stakeholders, but think that further engagement on this will be important.

### What will your office do about student absenteeism?

Unfortunately, we have a severe absenteeism crisis in WA, as evidenced in statewide and school-level data. At the start of this past school year, many days half of my students were absent. Schoolwide, 90% of Black senior boys were not attending class regularly. This is not primarily an enforcement issue, it is an engagement issue. As with most challenges, I bring together deep data with lived experience and expertise. In this case, we will do a deep dive into the data to understand which schools are outperforming attendance expectations, and what they are doing to make that happen. In general, re-engagement specialists are helpful, but some of the race-based disparities in attendance require a fundamental revisiting of ways in which our inequitable systems are especially alienating to certain students. This is another area where I have worked with numerous organizations and across the US to help schools develop and improve practices to create a welcoming and inclusive environment for all schools, while getting to the underlying causes of absenteeism. As Superintendent, I'll bring that expertise and skillset to ensuring access and engagement for all our students here in my home.

### How will you address the lingering effects of the pandemic on students' learning loss and social skills?

Since the pandemic, Washington's low-income students have fallen behind those of significantly less resourced states like Mississippi on reading and math.

Worse yet, the reason we are so far behind is because we have failed to implement best practices that are working in so

many other states that passed us by academically before and after the pandemic. For example, we have not followed the Biden administration guidance on making tutoring consistently accessible. We also haven't even implemented the US Surgeon General's guidance on youth mental health and social media, or guidance from local experts convened by the Children's Alliance, with whom I recently authored a policy paper on behavioral health.

As a teacher at Rainier Beach High School myself, I've seen firsthand how we are failing to support educators as well as students who are struggling with mental health and desperately trying to learn. I saw such passionate and talented teachers and students – smart, resilient, and poised to accomplish so much, if we only ensure they get the resources and opportunities they need and deserve.

**Who are your primary advisors on public education issues?**

I broadly consult a wide variety of practitioners, scholars, policymakers, as well as students and parents. I have spent my career in public education, including developing a deep expertise for both grassroots use of surveys, focus groups and individual stories, as well as connecting to and building strong relationships with senior most leaders. This means that I consult everyone from my students to President Obama's Secretary of Education on a regular basis, as well as drawing on data from millions of students and teachers that my organization has surveyed, and more.

**How will you support collective bargaining?**

Supporting the right of all workers to collectively bargain is something I feel incredibly strongly about. My mom was one of the first female union leaders in Washington and taught me from a young age to value the power of collective bargaining and unity to improve our education system for everyone.

As Superintendent of Public Instruction I will be a tireless advocate for workers, including by joining them on the picket line, lifting up their concerns regarding not just pay but working conditions, and by actively intervening to hold bad actors accountable when they attempt to undermine worker power.

**CERTIFICATION: The candidate hereby certifies that, to the best of their knowledge, the provided information is true and accurate.**

Yes