

# Santa Monica Democratic Club

## 2024 School Board Candidate Questionnaire

Thank you for your interest in the Santa Monica Democratic Club endorsement. Candidates seeking the endorsement of our Club must complete and return the following questionnaire. Only registered Democrats are eligible for our consideration. Submitting this questionnaire constitutes acknowledgment that its contents are now part of the public record and may be reproduced and distributed by the Santa Monica Democratic Club.

Please send the completed questionnaire to [smdemocrats@gmail.com](mailto:smdemocrats@gmail.com) by 11:59pm on May 18, 2024. Interview appointment times with our Executive Committee will be scheduled on a first come first served basis for the weekend of May 25/26 as the questionnaires are returned.

**None of these questions shall be construed as litmus tests. There are no questions that must be answered a certain way to be considered for our endorsement.**

### General Information

Candidate Name: Jon Kean

Email Address: [jon@jonkean.com](mailto:jon@jonkean.com)

Candidate's Current Occupation: Documentary Filmmaker

Candidate's Employer: Bala Cynwyd Productions

Campaign Contact Person (if other than candidate):

1. What qualifications do you bring to this office?

I am currently completing my second term as a Board of Education member for SMMUSD. In that time, I have served as Board President for two years and Board Vice President for three, including the current year. Prior to serving on the board, I was a PTA President at Roosevelt Elementary and Lincoln Middle School, served on Site Governance Councils at those two schools in addition to SAMOHI, and was a member of the Financial Oversight Committee for 4 years prior to my first election.

2. Why are you running?

As someone who believes in public service and servant leadership, I feel that my community and colleagues asking me to serve one additional term is a motivating factor. In addition, Covid definitely delayed some important initiatives in the district and I feel compelled to see them to fruition. There is important work to be done and I feel that I can play a useful role in helping this district meet specific goals. In addition, with a first year Superintendent, continuity on the board is a vital for his overall success. And, even after 8 years, I love doing the work and seeing the impact of it.

3. What are the top issues of your campaign? How do you plan to address those issues once elected?

I have always said that the primary job of a school board member is to provide strong governance concerning the district's finances while supporting the Superintendent to pursue and achieve the goals of the district. The most recent labor negotiations have helped us make large strides in providing fair compensation for our employees. A priority now is to maintain a sound budget with healthy reserves and a practical reserves policy. Getting the issue of Malibu Unification to the state legislators and voters of both communities is an issue that I hope to see

to completion. Continuing to let student engagement drive unique educational pathways and building upon our successes is an additional priority. An additional project that I have pursued for years now and I believe is closer to some execution is work force housing for a portion of our employees. And, as always, giving our current initiative the time and support needed to take root is crucial. The best of ideas can be ruined by impatience. Lastly, I am excited to work with the superintendent to undertake vigorous program evaluation so that resources can follow successful initiatives and approaches.

4. Please list all of your individual and/or organizational endorsements.

The endorsement process has just begun, but I am proud to have been supported in 2020 by SM Dem Club, LA Dem Club, SMRR, SEIU, CTA, LA Cope, Ted Lieu, Sheila Kuehl, Ben Allen, Richard Bloom, the majority of the SM City Council, all members of the SMMUSD BoE, and numerous neighborhood advocates. My apologies to those I have not listed out of space considerations.

5. How long have you lived in Santa Monica or Malibu? Where else have you lived? I moved to LA on November 11, 1989 and after a long stint in Venice moved to Ocean Park in 1997 and then Noma in 1999.

6. Will you pledge to serve on the School Board for your entire four year term? Absolutely. Consider it pledged.

## **Campaign Finance**

1. How much money have you raised for your campaign to date?

The campaign has only just begun and fundraising for my campaign has not started.

2. How much do you intend to raise by Election Day 2024?

Last election's total was a shade under \$50,000. My hope would be that this election would need slightly less due to some unique economies of scale.

3. Candidates for local office often choose not to take campaign contributions from particular types of organizations or industries. Are there any such sources from which you would decline donations? If so, which?

I have never been offered or accepted a donation from any organization or industry that has caused any scrutiny or consternation. That will not change.

## **Party / Activism**

1. How long have you been a registered Democrat? Have you ever been registered as a member of another political party, or as Decline To State? If so, which party and why?

I have been registered as a democrat since my first election in 1988 where I had the joy of voting for Michael Dukakis. 1992 was considerably more inspiring with President Clinton and Senators Feinstein and Boxer.

2. What is your experience with political activism? Have you ever volunteered or worked for a political campaign other than your own, and if so, in what capacity were you involved?

My first exposure to political activism was in high school as the president of our student council. But, working on behalf of the Clinton campaign in 1992 was eye opening. I was part of a successful theatre company at that time and we would host or appear at numerous information or fundraising events for Clinton and the Feinstein/Boxer as well. It was an exciting time to be introduced to politics. That led me to support unique candidates and campaigns over the past three decades. Of course, moving to Santa Monica where political activism is a way of life, I became far more involved in local issues and local politics.

3. Which political candidates have you endorsed or supported publicly in the past? Please list as many as possible, *especially where you endorsed during a contested primary.*

I tend to be more involved in local races so my efforts are seen in the local councils (SM and Malibu), rent control board, and school board. I did support Supervisor Horvath in her recent campaign. On the Council I supported Councilmember Torosis and Natalya Zernitskaya. For SMMUSD I was proud to support our newest member Alicia Mignano. I have always supported Ben Allen in his elections. My endorsements are almost always connected to a candidate's stance on public education.

4. Have you ever signed for or publicly supported efforts to recall a public official from office? If so, please list the name(s) of the officials and why you felt they should be recalled.

Ha! Besides being on the other side of this question?...Absolutely not. I believe in the ballot box as the way to elect and remove candidates. That goes back to 2003 and the recall of Governor Davis, which I did not support.

5. Please list any organizations with which you are a member, including any leadership position you have held in each organization.

Spending 8 years on the SMMUSD has meant that I have had to greatly curtail my other volunteer obligations. In the past I have been involved with numerous organizations dealing with human rights specifically around Holocaust education and issues in Rwanda. While I still try to attend meetings of other groups in which I have an interest, my time is just so limited by my schoolboard responsibilities. I am a member of the SM Dem Club, SMRR, CEPS and remain an active supporter of numerous museums dedicated to promoting education, tolerance and understanding in all communities.

6. Please confirm that you have read the latest version of the California Democratic Party Platform, as found below. List any items in the CDP Platform with which you disagree.

<https://cadem.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FinalPlatform2024.pdf>

I think it is best to only address the Education plank of this platform and I am very pleased to see that it is as if the CA Dems have pulled this from our LCAP in SMMUSD. I am thrilled to see a call for full funding of special education needs which I have been a loud advocate for, but it should call for guaranteed funding for ALL school districts to support universal TK education. Currently we have a mandate to provide this but it is unfunded as we are a basic aid district. The bullet point about charter schools is worthy of conversation but not really applicable in our community.

## **SMMUSD**

1. What are your top priorities for SMMUSD which you plan to address in this four year term?

Fiscal stability and a budget that allows for support of key initiatives and a well-compensated work force. Continued analysis of all programs and initiatives to maximize those that are effective and simplify our oversight. Get Unification to state legislators and voters in SM and M. Expansion of engagement driven pathways in high school. Support of English Language Learners after reclassification. Exploration of work force housing. Continuing to support our students with IEPs and 504s, while building connections between staff and families. Facilities upgrades especially at elementary schools.

2. What have been the strengths (and/or weaknesses) of Superintendent Shelton during his tenure thus far?

He has been here for less than a year and we have only just begun the process of conducting our annual superintendent review. But I will say that he has done a tremendous job of being seen on all of our campuses. It means a lot to our staff, our students, and our families when they see our superintendent on their sites. He has built upon the systems put in place by Dr. Drati and has been dedicated to implementing his vision for the district. I am also very happy that he is a big supporter of program analysis and that he has a gift at reframing issues that have been difficult for some to understand, such as the need for assessments as a means to impact and direct instruction for students at a specific level.

3. Given the district's Basic Aid status, what are the biggest impacts to the district as a result? How does this affect your funding priorities?

Basic Aid is largely misinterpreted as meaning "massive bags of cash" and overflowing budgets. This is not the reality. Basic Aid status can help and hinder. When other state aid districts were seeing 8-10% COLAs, we did not get any of that hindering our purchasing power. Revenue growth is critical for school districts and we were at a competitive disadvantage for those years. When one time funds are added to the LCFF floor, we do not get any of that. When the Governor funds universal TK through LCFF it exists as an unfunded mandate for us. But, when districts get a 1% COLA like this year, our revenue growth will far surpass that as we grow based primarily on our property tax growth. Another advantage is that the enrollment declines seen in almost every district across the state do not affect us financially as our funding is not tied to each student. This has allowed us to avoid painful cuts in staff and programs that have been seen in neighboring districts.

4. Do you support the petition to transition the SMMUSD Board into districted elections, or do you believe the Board should continue in its current form of seven at-large seats?

I do not support district elections for SMMUSD. While students from different neighborhoods often bring different needs to our schools, silo-ing their governance into districts is not the solution. We serve all students collectively and we have been successful in doing that with elections at large. Putting school board members into zero sum conversations over school funding is not the way to promote excellence and equity for all. What is good for, say, English Language Learners in one community is also good for all students in all communities. Under our current structure, all board members have a responsibility to all students. With districts the pressure will be to show "results" for a board member's own district and not for all students. It is not an approach that fosters good educational outcomes. The circumstances around school bonds would be even worse. As things are currently constituted, we all work to provide the best facilities for all schools because we represent all the schools. If we start advocating only for our own "home" schools we will cease to care for all students in lieu of "our own".

5. Deficit-based framing like "achievement gap" can increase challenges students from marginalized backgrounds face in academic environments. More widely, deficit framing can influence how broader communities see foundational complexities of education inequity. As an SMMUSD leader, how are you effectively shaping policy that helps students thrive and promotes healthy public debate?

I think we all agree that language matters and I have noticed a significant change in how we frame discussions from the dais. That said, we have to create environments for all students to thrive. The growth of restorative practices helps in this regard as it can bring people together and heal a community after a difficult event or action has transpired. Engagement and opportunity remain at the forefront of this discussion. Project based learning, the newly structured academies, and specialized flex time at SAMOHI can provide the opportunities for all students especially those who have been traditionally underserved. One of the best ways to

address these issues is to speak of them publicly. Because we, as a board, spoke often and publicly about the reclassification of English Language Learners, we could more effectively channel resources toward a specific goal and we monitored the progress carefully. This path to success can be modeled for many different issues. But we as a board do need to lead that discussion and create safe spaces for the conversations to take place.

6. What do you believe is the role of the District in providing high quality early childhood education and how will you fund expansion and quality improvement while maintaining accessibility and affordability?

Early education is vital to any district and we do it well in SMMUSD. In fact, I like to say that we lead the way with our youngest learners. Our social justice framework was embedded in our early education programs before it took root in K-12. We have added new avenues of connection and communication between our early ed programs and Kindergarten so that our teachers are sharing information and building continuity which leads to better awareness around the needs of all students. Our district took a bold step five years ago to leave Head Start and fund our programs through dollars from Measure GSH. This move was requested by our staff and they were right. We would have been unilaterally removed from Head Start within a year had we stayed. Instead, we now offer a wider array of services to all students who enter our early education classroom instead of some being siloed due to Head Start bureaucracies. Covid did not help us with staffing and we are still trying to recover, but our early ed programs are the gold standard.

7. What is your assessment of the status of Malibu unification, and what is remaining to be done to ensure financial equity for Santa Monica and Malibu students?

Having been a member of the SMMUSD subcommittee on unification I have spent an inordinate amount of time on this issue over the past 5-6 years. While I have been clear from the beginning in stating that I believe that we would all be stronger together it is not an option to continue the current status quo. The next step after this realization was to determine if a split could be achieved without disenfranchising any students in any area. To accomplish this we created the revenue sharing agreement which allows students in both communities to maintain current programming with a similar level of support. In Santa Monica, we examined the current financial needs and then focused on annual revenue growth. Without growth, a district cannot provide raises, cannot implement new initiatives, and basically will slowly wither. It was determined that a guaranteed annual growth factor of 4% would allow Santa Monica students to flourish while still allowing Malibu students to maintain current programs. Obviously, in 7-10 years, the district in Malibu will be on its way to becoming one of the richest in the state. It is yet to be seen whether enrollment in Malibu will be adequate to support a rigorous academic environment. But that is an issue for a future Malibu school board. After the split, my focus will be on Santa Monica students only. So yes. I will support the revenue sharing model as I believe it allows all students to succeed, provides local control for Malibu, and allows Santa Monica to focus on Santa Monica students and issues specifically without the distraction of any Malibu issues germane to their community. Of course, we have guard rails to address conflicts we believe will arise over time. Lastly, outside of the financial considerations, we have had to negotiate a split of property and possessions (who gets which bus?), as well as creating the structure of a JPA to address any issues or corrections that we know will inevitably arise and need attention. We have addressed what we know and what we believe what might happen, but we have to protect all students from the unknowns that will inevitably occur in the future. My hope is that the board (and the Malibu City Council) approves the work completed by the sub-committee, after public

input, and allows the state legislators and residents of Santa Monica and Malibu to weigh in on this important decision at the ballot box.

## **Student Concerns**

### **1. What is your idea of the perfect learning environment?**

Highly trained and engaged professionals in the classroom who facilitate and listen more than they speak (not the dreaded “Sage on the Stage”). Engaged students who have both structure and freedom to explore within their curricula, which is broad and reflects the community of which they are a part. Clean, safe, and modern classrooms that allow access to the natural surroundings of our beautiful communities. A Superintendent with a comprehensive vision to create opportunity for all students and a board that supports the plan by passing responsible budgets that prioritize initiatives that work. We also need every student to feel valued, included, and respected in every space in our district.

### **2. How is SMMUSD concretely supporting the mental health needs of culturally diverse learners?**

This is always an area where we want more. We more trained social workers. We want more on site therapists. We need to have the resources where the problems are arising. The topic of community health centers in each pathway has been discussed for many years and maybe some version of that could be effective. We are working on addressing attendance. While we don't need it for the bulk of our funding, we want our students in school where they can learn and receive any services that they might need. The cultural make up of our staff has changed significantly in the past few years and will continue to do so as we seek to maintain a staff that reflects our community. Suspension data is being studied as we move away from punishing behaviors because it is easier sometimes to just make the “problem” be out of your sight. I mentioned restorative practices earlier and they play an important role in healing rifts after confrontations or conflicts have occurred.

### **3. How do you feel about campus surveillance?**

I am in favor of exterior campus surveillance and we have that in place at most, if not all, sites. When an emergency occurs, having eyes on the outside of campuses in real time is a tremendous help and it also can help us solve problems after the fact as we can review where we had vulnerabilities and identify spaces where negative interactions have occurred. I do not support surveillance inside of schools with the sole exception of protecting storage spaces where valuable equipment is stored. We have had break ins happen and we cannot allow technology or valuable learning materials to be stolen or vandalized. Perhaps vandals will reconsider committing pointless acts of destruction if they know that they will be found out after footage is studied.

### **4. What is your position on gun safety at school? What steps can the School Board take to prevent violent shootings?**

The question above does involve to some degree the topic of exterior surveillance but the truth is, we need federal action taken to address the scourge of gun violence. We cannot think that we can stop it in Santa Monica. As for our own students, we constantly communicate with students to speak up if something feels wrong or if they hear/see something. And they do. We have trained staff who look for students who might be suffering under the weight of emotional or mental stresses. Our security teams are the best sources of information about student well-being and they are truly our front line to detect and prevent any trouble on campus. We review lockdown procedures with staff and ensure that necessary materials to remain in place are

available. It is horrible that we need to take these measures but it is a sad and troubling reality of our times. And while we can “harden” aspects of schools with door locks, entrances, and other vulnerable spaces, I do not believe that any school anywhere has the ability to 100% say that they can prevent these horrific incidents.

5. Do you support SMPD officers in the schools?

Only when requested by the site Principal for specific needs. We have a board policy in place for whenever a law officer has to enter a campus under any pretense.

6. How will you support our students to be critical thinkers, leaders, and activists, starting in elementary school? Would you support student activism such as the student walkouts in support of gun control, racial justice, climate strike, foreign divestment, etc.? How can these ideals be incorporated into the curriculum?

I do believe in creating critical thinkers and I also feel that our ACES curriculum must continue to present multiple factual sides to issues so that our students do not simply adopt a binary model of thinking that feels very prevalent at this time. After all, tik tok doesn't allow for much discussion of multiple viewpoints. Students need to learn to hold multiple truths at the same time. A better understanding of our local history, which has been incorporated into many lesson plans is also a way to provide our students with nuance. I want all of our students to find their particular voice as young as they can and learn to have passionate discussions with those who feel differently than they do. But I also want our students to have an understanding of fact as opposed to merely speaking “my truth”. Opinion is important but an opinion without any factual backing can be concerning and weaponized. Our students have advocated for climate change, renewable energy, mental health and the board has heard them, taken them seriously, and adjusted policy accordingly. We are 100% renewable energy now in our district. Students advocated for this, and while they might not have been exclusively responsible for their result, their work mattered and made a difference. Our environmental advances of the past few years have been greatly affected by student input and advocacy. Lastly, my daughter told a story of when she was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade and there was a big walkout planned. The teacher encouraged any student who wanted to participate in the walkout to do so if that was their belief. She also said that they would also be responsible for making up what they missed and, yes, it could affect their grade if they didn't as class would be held. Protest is a meaningful expression but with protest comes consequences. I do feel that students protesting now might not have learned from the Freedom Riders and civil rights advocates who fought Jim Crow laws in the South. Many were beaten and jailed. A few paid the ultimate price with their lives. I see the growing violence at protests now and I think back to that time and hope that everyone is a student of history. This takes me back to my point earlier. We must learn from history and we must learn our facts. I have great hope for the younger generation but I do have concerns over a binary mindset that seems to be preventing dialogue at this time.

7. How are the effects of learning loss from home instruction during the COVID pandemic still being felt by students, and in what ways are the district responding?

We are still seeing a decline in daily attendance as I think the belief that school is something that you do 180 days a year was warped by the distance learning and zooms of covid. In certain classes like math, students who fared better in distance learning are at or beyond grade level. But we do see students who didn't thrive in zoom world struggling to catch up in classes that clearly build vertically like math. Behaviors have improved this past year but we did see a level of immaturity at all grades post-covid. Our approaches to addressing this are too many to list but a big part is having a broad array of Tier I and Tier II interventions for students who are falling or have fallen behind. Our schools have created flex time within the daily schedule so students can

get help directly from their appropriate teacher. Tutoring is available in many formats: teachers, peers, online. Any students who needs help can get it. Next, we need to identify students who need help but for whatever reason are not asking for it. Our teachers communicate on this and they do know our students the best. If they see the need, they engage, and that is across many subject levels. Increasing parent education is also vital. Education is a partnership and all partners must do their work. If parents don't know how to help or where to help, that is where the district must step in to educate.

## **Social Justice**

1. What can SMMUSD do to better implement social justice instruction and otherwise address equity issues?

We had a Social Justice Annual Update presentation at our May 16 board meeting where we discussed upcoming trainings, implementations, and the status of existing initiatives. Professional development remains a key aspect for successful implementation and we are providing trainings on: history-social science framework, culturally responsive teaching, student engagement, and social justice through belonging, curiosity, and empowerment. A key aspect is working with students to help them produce and improve their own questions and then strategize how to use those questions and then reflecting. Our ACES (American Cultures Ethnic Studies) courses now have 13 unique choices and are a graduation requirement in SMMUSD, years ahead of the California graduation requirement.

2. How are you using your position on the School Board to assist systematically disadvantaged groups of residents of Santa Monica?

As I said earlier, identifying and speaking publicly about specific groups and needs is the first step to committing time and resources to fixing systemic problems. Our success as a district in reclassifying English language learners is an example of how this practice can work. The next step is to realize, through assessments and observation, what supports are needed post-reclassification. This model works and can be replicated across many platforms. A broader curriculum, tying larger historical events to those in our own "backyard" will drive an increase in engagement as will hiring a staff that reflects the diversity of our community.

3. In light of anti-DEI practices across the nation, how is SMMUSD encouraging opportunity based on place and promoting more equitable approaches to public education?

I think that the opposition to DEI is more of a political movement based on ideology. Acronyms and names are easy to attack and vilify. When we break this down into definable words, this backlash fades. We are lucky to live in a diverse community like Santa Monica, where we have geographical, ethnic, political, economic, and experiential diversity. We know that certain individuals represent communities that have been historically marginalized and these students need more support and more focus. This is the definition of equity. Some students need more to achieve a similar opportunity. Lastly, we must include everyone, even those with whom we have very little in common. We can stay in our own personal echo chambers but until we take on the hard work of collaborating with those who see things differently we will not create meaningful and lasting solutions. I personally struggle with this but I work at it. I take meetings and calls with people I don't necessarily like but I do understand that all voices must be included. Of course, there are exceptions to this. I have zero time for hate speech, prejudice, and antisemitism or in fact hatred of any kind.

## **Ballot Measures**

Do you support the Justice For Renters Act? Yes.

Do you support the repeal of Article 34? Yes.

Do you support the initiative to require new local taxes to pass by a two-thirds vote? No.

Do you support the potential measure to amend Prop 47? No.

Do you support the proposed amendments to Measure GS to exempt multifamily housing? No.

## **Additional Questions**

1. What role do you believe the Santa Monica Democratic Club should have in our City?

The SM Dem Club must continue to educate Democrats on policy, candidates, and discussions happening locally, statewide, and nationally. It is an important source of trusted information. It must continue to advocate for and against initiatives at the same three levels of government. Not everyone can stay current and engaged on every issue, but we must have trusted organizations who can speak for like-minded citizens.

2. If elected, how would you attempt to interact with the Santa Monica Democratic Club and other political organizations to ensure community buy-in on new proposals?

I have always maintained an open relationship with, not just the Dem Club, but any local group or individual who wishes to speak. One of my favorite quotes comes from Senator Cory Booker who said "I don't need to attend every argument I'm invited to". To his point, I don't want to walk into fights, but I will respect any thoughtful viewpoint on any issue regardless of my position. The role of an elected official is to meet, not only with allies, but with those we disagree with passionately. I don't want to argue. But I want to listen and engage. The Dem Club is certainly a safe harbor for discussion and I have always engaged whether I agree or not.

3. What is the most important topic that was left off of this questionnaire?

With 36 questions you didn't miss much! I think finances and budget could have had more focus. I do like talking about political philosophy and social issues, but we do need to understand that the job of a Board Member is to provide sound governance and that includes having a responsible budget that speaks to our district and community priorities. It's not as much fun to talk about but it is a core aspect of the job. We can do anything we want to do in SMMUSD but we can't do everything we want to do. Sound governance allows us to do more of what we want and I am proud of role as a leader on all fiscal issues in the district.