

# **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: **Maria Leon-Vazquez**

Email Address: **maria4smmusd@gmail.com**

Candidate's Current Occupation: **Project Manager**

Candidate's Employer: **Santa Monica College**

Campaign Contact Person (if other than candidate):

1. What qualifications do you bring to this office?

**I have been a school board member for almost 24 years. I have a law school education that affords me the ability to be analytical, articulate, a good listener, respectful of people's comments, and most importantly, I have institutional knowledge. I bring my professional, educational, community and political experience of over forty years to this office. I also bring contacts, relationships, and resources that I have made in my professional, political and community life. I have always done my homework and come to Board meetings prepared for discussion and vote on Board issues.**

2. Why are you running?

**I have over 24 years of institutional knowledge that is needed as we move forward with the District priorities. I was the President of the Board that hired Dr. Antonio Shelton as the present Superintendent. He along with his Leadership Team have begun to unpack and respond to the question: Why the promising initiatives undertaken by SMMUSD in the last two decades have not reduced the disparities in student achievement. He has responded to this question with his Six Priorities discussed in SMMUSD Section, Question 2 below. I strongly support his program of change. I am a change agent and I want to be supportive of Dr. Shelton's proposed changes.**

**I am the product of a lower-socio economic, working-class family raised in Santa Monica and bring that perspective to the Board. There needs to be a diversity of**

**perspectives and opinion on the Board to reach good decisions and I am that voice.**

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

**1. Meeting our District Mission of “Extraordinary achievement for all students while simultaneously closing the achievement gap.”**

**My plan is to support and financially prioritize these programs that allows students to achieve their goals, i.e. Dual Immersion program, AVID, Young Collegians, Project Lead the Way, STEM, Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS), Visual & Performing Arts, Personalized Projects-Based Learning, Family Engagement Network, Master Plan for English Learners, Digital Learning Program, ACES (American Cultures Ethnic Studies), 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade College English, and Environmental/Sustainability.**

**2. Wellness Services Centers**

**The establishment of Wellness Centers at all our schools that would provide mental health counseling to assist students and their families with depression, stress, anxiety, trauma, relationship difficulties, and grief and loss issues. The Pandemic increased the socio-emotional feelings of students, exacerbated anxiety, and the realization of our community’s vulnerability.**

**3. Be the driver of SMMUSD’s strategic shift to a 21<sup>st</sup> leading to 22<sup>nd</sup> century education.**

**My plan is to continue to use my professional expertise and leadership in providing technical assistance to the district; and leveraging the education/career technical grants I manage at SMC. A point non-negotiable is that all SMMUSD graduates must be college AND career ready, culturally, and socially conscious, multi-lingual communicators, global citizens, and life-long learners.**

**4. Balance the budget and become more fiscally solvent.**

**My plan is to have the District present us the budget in terms of programming that is most essential for student achievement and success. This means yearly evaluation of programs to make sure they are being effective and presented in the most cost-effective manner. With a decreasing student population, we need to review and keep an eye on the ratio of staffing to students as our most expensive budget line item is employment salary and benefits.**

**5. Provide safe, well-maintained learning environments that are culturally responsive and conducive to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.**

**My plan is to continue to make good decisions on how the construction bond monies are programmed and expended for modernization, technology, and safety updates. Prioritization of a maintenance budget to upkeep the schools so that students and families can feel confident knowing their campuses are safe.**

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

**Senator Ben Allen; Board of Equalization Board Member Tony Vazquez; SMMUSD Boardmembers Jon Kean, Laurie Lieberman, Alicia Mignano, Jennifer Smith, Dr. Richard Tahvildaran-Jesswein; College Board of Trustees Dr. Nancy Greenstein, Dr. Margaret Quinones-Perez, Dr. Sion Roy, Barry Snell**

5. How long have you lived in Santa Monica or Malibu? Where else have you lived?  
**Santa Monica, CA since 1959**
6. Will you pledge to serve on the School Board for your entire four-year term?  
**Yes**

## **Campaign Finance**

1. How much money have you raised for your campaign to date?  
**I have pledges for \$1000. In the process of opening campaign account.**
2. How much do you intend to raise by Election Day 2024?  
**\$30,000**
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?  
**Tobacco, Liquor, Oil, Anti SMMR & SMDC organizations, real estate developers, and individuals that I do not care for their politics.**

## **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 a registered Democrat since 1978 as I became a naturalized citizen on October 7, 1977.**
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?  
**I have been active in campaigns since 1985 with SMRR and SMDC. I was involved in campaign strategy, calling and walking precincts, and clerical work.**
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*.  
**Tony Vazquez; Ben Allen; Lindsey Horvath; Ted Lieu; Gavin Newsome; Rick Chavez Zbur; School Board Members Jon Kean, Laurie Lieberman, Alicia Mignano, Jennifer Smith, Dr. Richard Tahvildaran-Jesswein; College Board of Trustees Dr. Nancy Greenstein, Dr. Margaret Quinones-Perez, Dr. Sion Roy, Barry Snell, Dr. Tom Peters, Susan Aminoff; former Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, Santa Monica City Council Sue Himmelrich, Caroline Torosis, Jesse Zwick, Lana Negrete, most SMRR/SMDC and progressive Democratic candidates.**
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.  
**No**
5. Please list any organizations with which you are a member, including any leadership position you have held in each organization.  
**SMRR, SMDC, SM/MPTA, CSBA, CABE, NALEO, Latino School Board Assn.**

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>  
**Yes, I have read and agree with the CDP Platform.**

## **SMMUSD**

1. What are your top priorities for SMMUSD which you plan to address in this four-year term? (detailed response in General Information Question 3)
  - 1. Meeting our District Mission of “Extraordinary achievement for all students while simultaneously closing the achievement gap.”**
  - 2. Establishment of Wellness Services Centers**
  - 3. Strongly drive SMMUSD’s strategic shift to a 21<sup>st</sup> leading to 22<sup>nd</sup> century education.**
  - 4. Balance the budget and become more fiscally solvent.**
  - 5. Provide safe, well-maintained learning environments that are culturally responsive and conducive to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning.**
  
2. What have been the strengths (and/or weaknesses) of Superintendent Shelton during his tenure thus far?

**Superintendent Shelton with his Leadership Team and the Board have begun to unpack and respond to the question as to why the promising initiatives undertaken by SMMUSD in the past and its efforts have not reduced the disparities in student achievement.**

**Dr. Noguera’s plan concluded that the District’s work revealed the lack of consistency in teaching practices which contributed to the lack of significant or sustainable improvements in academic outcomes for African American and Latino students, English language learners, children with learning disabilities and low-income students. The work to address the District’s problems was begun by Dr. Drati and Dr. Mora in the implementation of systems, structures, processes, and practices aimed at eliminating academic disparities. Since Dr. Shelton was part of the District Leadership, as principal of SAMOHI, he has seamlessly continued the education changes.**

**Dr. Shelton is building capacity with professional development for staff, and using the various leadership teams in the district, schools, and community to have discussions and build leadership capacity from the middle. Dr. Shelton is building District capacity through his Six Priority Areas that support our three goals in our Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP): (1) All graduates are socially just and ready for college and career; (2) English Learners will become proficient in English while engaging in a rigorous, culturally and linguistically responsive, standards-aligned core curriculum; and (3) All students and families engage in safe, well-maintained schools that are culturally responsive and conducive to 21<sup>st</sup> century.**

**The Six Priorities are (1) Reclassification – enhancing yearly growth in the reclassification of students by implementing a consistency in English Language Development; (2) Special Education – meeting and maintaining students’ needs through rigorous compliance, comprehensive training, and transparent communication; (3) Transformative Approaches – empowering students by**

advocating for the implementation of restorative practices, project-based learning, and career technical education opportunities; (4) Guaranteed Viable Curriculum – offer clear strategic guidance and robust support to school sites dedicated to enhancing and optimizing a multi-tiered system of supports; (5) Fiscal Services – fiscal stewardship over the District’s resources in order to make judicious financial decisions in order to deliver a great education experience to every student; and (6) Maintenance – the District will have sufficient staff capacity to promptly handle all routine work orders via comprehensive training on a systematic approach and effective communication on the work to be done.

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?

**As a Basic Aid district our funding is no longer dependent on average daily attendance of students and our district keeps the money from our local property taxes after some adjustments/deductions. However, as a Basic Aid District, we do not receive monies for TK and get no COLA increases. This means SMMUSD must budget for TK teachers, staff, and classrooms from the general budget, and for salary increases. These two budget items are funding priorities so on a yearly basis, the Board needs to evaluate our funding priorities to balance our budget.**

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?

**No, I do not. What makes Santa Monica unique is the community support that can rally around progressive, democratic issues that support Santa Monica. I don’t believe there is a need for districts so long as there is diversity amongst the school board and there is commitment from the progressive, democratic community for a diverse school board.**

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 was an immigrant student that came with my familia in search of the American Dream. My parents had 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade educations. An uncle and my padrino helped me and my family come to Los Angeles, and in 1959, to the Pico Neighborhood to an apartment that is now the I-10 freeway.**

**My personal life experiences and challenges faced in attaining an education in this country gives me a great perspective as a Board member in the shaping of policy that will help students thrive and promote healthy public debate.**

**A great example is the Board’s adoption of a resolution on November 2, 2023, which declared that climate change is one of the most pressing crises of our Time; that the District has an obligation and a responsibility to prepare students for a World shaped by the degradation of our environment; and set forth a commitment to develop and support existing curricula and practice to establish a minimum standard of climate literacy for its students. I worked with the students during the summer of 2023, and asked that they work with the CTA president and**

**teacher leadership. The students and teachers mutually agreed on the resolution that was brought to the Board in November 2023. As an SMC administrator, I am working on a collaboration between SMC and SMMUSD faculty to integrate SAMOHI students into the Blue Economy pathway.**

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?

**I strongly believe that the District has the responsibility in providing high quality early childhood education for our community, and we do. We offer Infant/Toddler care, Seaside and California State Preschool Programs, Full and Part Day Preschool Programs and our School Age Program for students in Grades TK-3. A couple of years before the pandemic, as a member of the Board we voted to invest \$1 million to institutionalize our early childhood programs. We declined federal Head Start monies because of the economic limitation imposed for our families. Creating our own early childhood programs allowed more of our working families to utilize the programs in their home schools. Of course, the fees charged were on a sliding scale which meant that families that did not qualify for federal Head Start could now receive and pay for the programs. Our Director of Early Childhood programs was able to start and grow the program and made it financially successful. However, the pandemic closed our program and we have been trying to grow it again. We have a tremendous need but have not been able to scale up to pre-Pandemic times.**

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?

**The City of Malibu and our Board subcommittee have worked diligently to ensure that the revenue agreement reflect both parties' commitment to uphold guiding principles that prioritize equity, fairness, and ultimately, the local control in the education of ALL students. Each party had their own financial people working on the revenue agreement, and almost all case scenarios were played out to ensure that students in both cities would have access to a quality education, and not be short changed. At the end of the day, it was SMMUSD's financial person's revenue formula that was accepted with some minor changes by Malibu. This is the best-case scenario of an agreement that is fair and equitable. Next Malibu needs to meet the other criteria for unification so that their Unification petition is approved.**

## **Student Concerns**

1. What is your idea of the perfect learning environment?
  1. **I would like to see a more diverse teaching staff and administrators so that students can see staff that looks like them and as role models.**
  2. **I would like to update the job descriptions of teachers and administrators to include bilingual/bicultural certification, DEI training, PBL training, restorative justice training, Mindfulness training and other relevant professional development which are a MUST to 21<sup>st</sup> century education.**

3. I would implement student home visits to meet the family when issues arise.
4. I would have teachers /counselors call home to congratulate students when something positive has occurred in the classroom or student's life – not just when there is something wrong.
5. I would implement a District Tour as part of the hiring and welcome process to SMMUSD. In this way, new staff would be made aware of the SMMUSD community they will be serving, and specifically, the Pico Neighborhood.
6. I would set up more social free events as a District, i.e. picnics, sporting events/games in our local school parks to build a true community atmosphere.
7. I would establish professional development that would be geared to building capacity amongst staff to better serve our students.

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

**SMMUSD is presently using the educational programs to continue the progress in closing learning gaps through the implementation, expansion or enhancement of learning supports for students. It continues to train school staff in strategies to engage students and families in addressing students' socio-emotional health and academic needs. SMMUSD has continued to partner with the Community to provide extended social-emotional student support.**

3. How do you feel about campus surveillance?

**My interpretation of campus surveillance is setting up cameras around the perimeters of the school campuses and the campus buildings to prevent theft and vandalism. Our campus security and teachers play an important role in the safety of our campuses. Our staff/adults on campus establishing trust with students is the best surveillance a campus can have.**

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

1. I am for gun control and for the ban of assault weapons.

2. Continue review of our District and individual schools' safety protocols and maintain an emergency control center.

3. We need to continue to be vigilant in partnership with the City of Santa Monica and Santa Monica College Police departments.

4. Establish Santa Monica Community Town Halls to give information on gun safety and promote prevention of violent shooting in the educational institutions and the city-at-large.

5. Train our school security along with the SMPD and SMCPD for common procedures in emergency situations.

6. The School Board also needs to work more collaboratively with the Santa Monica City Council and the College Board of Trustees to build a stronger community-based police program.

5. Do you support SMPD officers in the schools?

**I do support SMPD officers in our schools as community resource officers, their involvement in our school events, and as positive role models for our students.**

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 really believe in the personalized projects-based learning approach of education where students learn academic subject matter by finding solutions to problems in their home lives, school, community and eventually the nation and world around them. They need to believe that they are the future leaders, professionals and people that will have the means to solve the problems of the world. PBL education has begun in the elementary schools.**

**Yes, I support student activism if it is incorporated as an education/life learning moment. The topics can be incorporated in all academic subjects and assignments. I was part of the student walkouts in support of gun control. My role was one of legal adviser and assisted the student leadership in maintaining peace and order during the walkout. I was very proud of our students and their leadership in organizing such a respectful and safe gathering in collaboration with the local authorities.**

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?

**SMMUSD is presently using the educational programs to continue the progress in closing learning gaps through the implementation, expansion or enhancement of learning supports for students. It continues to train school staff in strategies to engage students and families in addressing students' social-emotional health and academic needs. It continues to provide students with access to technology, high-speed internet and other academic supports as needed. The District supported SAMOHI's request to set the failing grade at 50 to extend instructional learning time so that students could remedy their grades to graduate. SMMUSD has continued to partner with the Community to provide extended social-emotional student support.**

**SMMUSD is building capacity with professional development for staff, and using the various leadership teams to have discussions and build leadership capacity to meet the Six Priority Areas that support our three goals in our Local Control Accountability Plan (LCAP).**

## **Social Justice**

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

**SMMUSD needs to negotiate with the teachers and agree to make DEI training, PBL training, restorative justice training, Mindfulness training and other relevant professional development a must to address equity issues.**

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

**My personal life experiences and challenges faced in attaining an education in this country gives me a great perspective as a Board member in the shaping of**



**policy that will help disadvantaged students thrive and receive a great education in this District.**

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?  
**Superintendent Shelton has support from his Leadership Team and the Board to move towards DEI training, PBL training, restorative justice training, Mindfulness training, and other relevant professional development. The training started during Dr. Drati's superintendency. Dr. Shelton has continued the work and is further strengthening the District's work.**

## **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 Club should be the voice of democracy in our community. We need to continue to educate the community by presenting candidates, propositions, bonds, and legislation so we can have good political discourse. The Club is recruiting the next generation of Democratic leaders, but we need to have educational democratic forums and be more aggressive in recruiting more diverse community leaders.**
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?  
**Yes**
3. What is the most important topic that was left off of this questionnaire?  
**The SMMUSD Visual and Performing Arts are world renowned. However, there is a lack of diversity in the top vocal and music ensembles. My response was to establish another genre of music and dance. I was the impetus in moving forward the Mariachi and Ballet Folclorico ensembles and Dr. Jacqueline Mora made it happen. Ballet Folclorico/ Mariachi are great opportunities for our students to learn the language, culture, and history of our neighbor - Mexico. Ballet Folclorico and Mariachi have an extraordinary ability to transcend boundaries, connecting people from various cultures and backgrounds in profound and meaningful ways.**