

## General Information

Candidate Name: Robbie (Robert) Staenberg

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Candidate's Current Occupation: Staff Member for Assemblymember Rick Chavez Zbur (AD-51)

Candidate's Employer: California State Assembly

Campaign Contact Person (if other than candidate): Robbie Staenberg

### 1. What qualifications do you bring to this office?

I was born and raised in Santa Monica and attended our excellent public schools for the entirety of my K-12 education. I graduated from Santa Monica High School in 2014 and then attended Columbia University, where I double majored in history and political science. After graduation, I joined Teach for America and moved to Oakland, California where I was hired as a high school social studies teacher at a Title 1 school. I taught there from 2018-2023, during which time I created a new ninth-grade writing course and our AP American Government and Politics course (there was no AP Gov prior).

My deep engagement with my students over those years profoundly deepened my commitment to public education and my passion for effective policy on the local, state, and federal level. My students were predominantly first-generation students of color, more than 90% of whom were on free or reduced lunch—and many existed in a system where their future appeared preordained. Because of those expectations, I was and am particularly proud that my AP Government students passed the AP exam at a rate exceeding both the California and US average, defying expectations of what students at a Title I high school can achieve.

Over the course of three years, I also helped to create a program for our college bound students to systematically workshop their application essays. This, along with my work with some of our most vulnerable students, gave me deeper insights into my students and their lives than I had ever expected. I worked to pair rigorous expectations with empathy and personal dedication, and I am proud of the results I achieved.

After earning an initial preliminary teaching credential, I then cleared my teaching credential (which might not sound like much but isn't easiest process!). Taken together, I hope to bring the lessons from my classroom to our School Board. There are more lessons than I can list here, but some include an understanding of the challenges teachers face on a daily basis, the critical role of parental involvement, the need for collaborative environments (both for teachers and students), and perhaps most importantly, a fundamental belief in the ability of all students to succeed.

While my experience as a teacher certainly included many challenges, it was incredibly rewarding and personally meaningful. Yet ultimately, I left the classroom because, after clearing my credential, I was aware that I could return to the classroom later in my life, and I wanted to try to spend some time working on addressing some of the systemic obstacles my students faced—obstacles that I could not address as an individual teacher.

I decided I wanted to try to contribute to policy, or at least engage with policymakers, in a more serious way. And so, after I trained my replacement teacher—an amazing young woman who had grown up in the community, graduated from our school, and attended UC Davis—I got a job working for our State Assemblymember, Rick Chavez Zbur.

My role with the Assembly has given me an opportunity to engage with the state legislature and a policy making process that directly affects the lives of millions of Californians. I hope to bring this knowledge, along with my experience as a teacher and as an SMMUSD student to the Board in the coming term.

After that long answer, here's a quick summary of the qualifications that I'll bring to this office:

- I am the only candidate who is a credentialed teacher with multiple years of K-12 teaching experience.
- I will bring an understanding of the state legislature and state government that will be useful to the District and my fellow board members.
- I attended our K-12 schools relatively recently (I am 30); I know our schools and our community.

## 2. Why are you running?

I hope my answer to the first question addresses the core of why I am running. Essentially, I love our schools, care profoundly about public education and the role it plays in our society, and believe that I can bring a useful set of experiences and perspectives to the board.

## 3. What are the top issues of your campaign, and how do they differ from other candidates in this race? How do you plan to address those issues once elected?

I'm not in a position to speak on other candidates' top issues, but here are mine:

- Openness and engagement: I want to improve the connection between our community and our Board.
- Achievement and equity: I believe we can push for academic excellence across all grade levels and across all socioeconomic groups without sacrificing equity.
- Caution on technology: While AI offers enormous opportunities to customize instruction, we must focus on fostering our students' independent, critical thinking skills. (And no phones!)
- Sound, data-driven fiscal and educational policy: The Board should fully evaluate existing programs before adding new mandates; teachers must know that the any new initiatives are thought-through and here for the long-term.

I will bring my experience as a teacher and legislative staff member, along with my local relationships and knowledge, into my efforts to positively impact these issue areas.

4. Please list all endorsements received to date (individual and organizational).

(Titles in the list below are noted for identification purposes only. This may not be my complete endorsement list, and I apologize for anyone I missed.)

- Alicia Mignano — SMMUSD Board of Education (President)
- Laurie Lieberman — SMMUSD Board of Education (Vice President)
- Maria Leon-Vazquez — SMMUSD Board of Education
- Richard Tahvildaran-Jesswein — SMMUSD Board of Education
- Jon Kean — SMMUSD Board of Education
- Jennifer Smith — SMMUSD Board of Education
- Nicole Faries — President, Santa Monica-Malibu Council of PTAs
- Caroline Torosis — SM City Council (Mayor)
- Lana Negrete — SM City Council
- Dan Hall — SM City Council
- Ellis Raskin — SM City Council
- Barry Snell — SM City Council
- Gleam Davis — Former SM City Councilmember / Mayor
- Dr. Sion Roy — SMC Board of Trustees (Chair), Past President of the Santa Monica Democratic Club
- Anastasia Foster — SMC Board of Trustees
- Sophia Manavi — SMC Student Trustee
- Danny Ivanov — SM Rent Control Board (Vice Chair)
- Kay Ambriz — SM Rent Control Board
- Rick Chavez Zbur — CA State Assemblymember, 51st District
- Shari Davis — SMC Adjunct Professor (Co-Director, Public Policy Institute), Former Chair of CEPS, Community for Excellent Public Schools

5. How long have you lived in Santa Monica or Malibu? Where else have you lived?

I was born and raised in Santa Monica and currently live in Santa Monica. I have also lived in the Bay Area and New York City.

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

Yes.

7. What is your history of watching, attending, or speaking at SMMUSD School Board meetings? (If incumbent, prior to your own service.)

I have attended and spoken at board meetings in Santa Monica and in Malibu. I have also watched board meetings online.

## **Campaign Finance**

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

I have raised around \$22,000 to date.

2. How much do you intend to raise by Election Day 2026?

I do not have a set amount that I intend to raise by election day. I think that I have a strong message and set of experiences, so if this is a competitive race, I will aim to make sure that I raise enough money to widely communicate that message and experience.

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

There are definitely organizations and industries that I would not take money from, but I can't imagine any of those organizations or industries being involved in this school board race. If, in the context of my school board campaign, there are organizations/industries that members of the Democratic Club believe should be looked at with skepticism, I would be very interested to hear more. The bottom line is that I would never take a dollar from anyone who would expect that their money would entitle them to influence my actions on the Board in any way, regardless of their motives and values. And I hope it goes without saying that I would never take a contribution from an individual or entity who I believe is harming or seeking to harm our students, teachers, staff, parents, or school community.

## 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?

My recollection is that I pre-registered to vote when I was 16 or 17 (when applying for my drivers' license) and that I selected Democrat. I am not sure how to confirm this detail, but I think that I have been a registered Democrat for as long as I have been eligible to vote.

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 political activism has been focused on direct public service rather than campaign work. As a teacher, I viewed every day as a meaningful opportunity to make a difference in my students' lives – a form of activism that was not political, at least not by the conventional definition of political. I do currently work for an elected official, but I am not on his political team (meaning I do not work on his campaign).

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

While I've been civically engaged and a consistent voter, I have not been in a position to publicly endorse candidates or ballot measures in the past.

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.

Not as far as I recall.

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

The Santa Monica Democratic Club, Santa Monicans for Renters' Rights, the PTAs of Franklin, Lincoln, and Santa Monica High School (as an alum).

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/2026/02/CDP-Platform-2026-FINAL-Platform-Adopted-2.22.26.pdf>

Yes.

## District Governance & Finance

1. What are your top priorities for SMMUSD over the next four years?

- Ensuring engagement, collaboration, and transparency with our Santa Monica community
- Focusing on academic excellence for all students
- Decreasing the gap in outcomes between our students with the lowest and highest academic performance
- Bringing the discussion/study of the role of artificial intelligence in the classroom to the Board and the school community. We must ensure that our students are thinking critically and independently, and that they are as prepared as possible for an uncertain technological future.
- Championing sound, data-driven fiscal and educational policy

2. How do you assess SMMUSD's current approach to public engagement and transparency? What specific steps would you take to strengthen public trust, ensure meaningful community input, and maintain accountability in Board decision-making?

In my conversations with folks around Santa Monica, including parents, parent leaders, teachers, and engaged residents, I have found that there is a degree of dissatisfaction in the way the District engages with the public. I think that our Board members have been working admirably and diligently to improve outcomes for our students, but clearly there have been moments that have left some members of our community with the impression that the Board is not open or interested in their input.

In both my past role as a teacher and in my current role working for our State Assemblymember, I have spent a significant amount of time and energy engaging with different aspects of the public, and I genuinely value and appreciate community input. With that in mind, one of my principal goals on the Board is interpersonal in nature—to connect with a wide range of stakeholders in Santa Monica and make sure that their views and the views of the communities they represent are not only *heard* but really *listened to*.

3. How would you approach working with the Superintendent and district staff to effectively implement Board policies?

I see the role of the Board as maintaining a macro or “big picture” perspective. It's important to inform that perspective by working regularly with the Superintendent and District staff while avoiding the trap of becoming a micromanager who fails to respect the expertise and knowledge that staff and teachers bring to work every day. I know firsthand the importance of giving teachers the autonomy and flexibility they need to succeed while maintaining a district or school-wide forward-looking vision, clear goals, and prudent management.

4. How do you assess the district's current financial position, and what steps would you take to ensure long-term fiscal stability?

The district's current financial position is complex. First, our structural deficit has grown to around 9.5 million dollars, an obviously worrying figure that needs to be addressed. Second, while enrollment has decreased significantly in recent years, it has appeared to stabilize – which would be a welcome financial improvement. Third, despite past projected deficits, the district has built and maintained a comfortable reserve that ensures stability over the next couple of years. Fourth, the district faces the concerning possibility of an elimination of the 12 million dollars provided by the city through the MUFA – which if eliminated would significantly negatively impact our financial position. Fifth and finally, we are a basic aid district which makes us substantially less dependent on the state's financial picture when determining our budget.

Rather than describe our current financial position as either strong or weak, I would characterize this as a moment of fiscal uncertainty – a moment where we have a clear opportunity to set ourselves on a clear and improved financial path.

In order to ensure long term fiscal strength, those risks noted above must be addressed. Accordingly, I would like to see the district continue to take action in the following areas:

- Address our structural deficit
- Address the risk of the elimination or reduction of the MUFA
- Continue to work to preserve enrollment and, if possible, reverse declines.

5. Given the district's Basic Aid status, how should funding priorities be set during periods of economic uncertainty?

We are very fortunate to be a Basic Aid district. This status means that while we are dependent on local revenues, we are much less dependent on the vicissitudes of the state budget, which can be prone to more significant fluctuations. As someone who used to teach in a district that was quite far from basic aid—and therefore very dependent on the state budget—the added security that comes with being a basic aid district is valuable. That said, even a basic aid district has periods of economic uncertainty. Rather than wait for a period of uncertainty to determine how funding priorities should be set, the District should continue to maintain and, when possible, build its reserve. (Notably, basic aid districts are required to have larger reserves given their independence from state backstops.) If, in the future, there is a financial challenge that cannot be offset by prudent use of reserve funds, then the District will have to set funding priorities, and these should be based around the core function of a K-12 school: ensuring excellent academic instruction. However, we are fortunate to be in a very well-resourced community, and in a period of real economic uncertainty, I would look to engage with any and all outside sources of funding to ensure that we are preserving all of the programs that make SMMUSD what it is.

6. Do you support the currently proposed parcel tax measure for SMMUSD? Why or why not? In your answer, please address how you evaluate the measure's structure, its

relationship to the joint use agreement, and how the District should ensure accountability for the use of these funds.

Short answer: Yes.

The District needs to be confident in its continued fiscal position. I think that, in ordinary circumstances, the appropriate course of action would be for the Board to press the city to commit to maintaining or expanding the twelve million dollars supplied annually through the Master Facilities Use Agreement (MFUA). However, the fiscal challenges facing the city as a result of the Uller cases have put that funding in jeopardy, and the proposed parcel tax provides a long-term solution. With that in mind, I signed the petition to put the parcel tax on the ballot, and I will be voting for it in November.

One important caveat: this parcel tax should not mean that the city is forever “off the hook” for renewing the funding that comes through the MFUA. In a period of financial distress, the District should not be dependent on additional revenue from the City, and of course, the District should continue to allow residents to have access to facilities. (On that note, I was pleased to see the Board unanimously pass Resolution No. 25-66 which makes clear that even without the MFUA, District facilities will continue to be available to the community.) Yet when this period of fiscal distress comes to an end, the District should continue to press the city to renew some or all of the funding that currently comes through the MFUA.

7. What is your assessment of Malibu unification, and what remains to ensure financial and educational equity for both Santa Monica and Malibu students?

My assessment is that after a decades-long process, Malibu and SMMUSD finally reached a set of three agreements which the District believes will ensure financial and educational equity. An enormous amount of work has gone into this process from leaders in Malibu, SMMUSD board members and District staff, and a range of advocates. For my part, I look forward to better understanding what all parties see as the next steps.

8. Based on results from the first few years of implementation, do you believe that 2022's Measure GS should be amended? If so, how and why?

My first answer is not an original idea, but I think it is an interesting one: if transfer taxes were to be amended on the state level, as has been suggested a couple of times now, the state should aim to replace any funds that are reduced or eliminated as a result.

And on the local level, my understanding is that amending Measure GS would require a ballot measure, and I have not heard about any serious discussion of bringing something like that forward.

## **Students & Learning Climate**

1. What specific steps would you take to improve student outcomes across the district?  
How should success be measured?

I see this question as broken into three parts:

1. How to improve educational outcomes across the student body as a whole
2. How to reduce disparities in outcomes between different student groups
3. How to improve outcomes in physical and mental health

Since #2 and #3 are addressed later in the questionnaire, I thought I'd focus on #1.

We need to ensure that our highest performing students are actively challenged academically while simultaneously ensuring that our most academically vulnerable students are given the tools needed to succeed. My teaching experience has given me confidence that it is possible to make significant strides for both of these segments of a school community, though this can certainly be difficult. In working to improve educational outcomes across the student body as a whole, my first step would be to assess where and how our teachers think that outcomes can be improved. Our teachers work with our students every day, and no one is in a better place to understand what changes or additions are necessary to improve outcomes. As we measure the effectiveness of existing strategies and implement new strategies, we must combine qualitative (survey, interview, observation) data with measurable data on outcomes. This requires that at least some, if not most, of our goals and programs are specific and measurable. Throughout this process, maintaining an open dialogue with our broader school community is paramount.

2. How should SMMUSD support student mental health and well-being, and what role should schools play in this area?

Schools should be conscious that they are educating and caring for the whole child. While academic outcomes are paramount, schools should also prioritize mental and physical health. Supporting mental health and well-being takes many forms in our schools; on the most basic level, this requires that students have easy access to well-trained counselors and that student sentiment is regularly measured and taken into account when the Board makes decisions.

3. In light of increasing political pressure on public education nationwide, how should SMMUSD approach decisions around curriculum, instruction, and inclusive learning environments?

SMMUSD should not allow political pressure to impact decisions around curriculum, instruction, and inclusive learning. As a Board Member, I would rather lose my seat than allow our students' education to be impacted by political pressure.

4. How should the District address persistent disparities in educational outcomes among different student groups?

The Noguera Report (2016) reflects some of what I saw myself as a student in our K-12 schools, and while outcomes generally have improved since the Report was published, significant and problematic disparities remain. I think that, in the spirit of points made in the Report, we need to audit our current initiatives with two questions in mind: 1) is the initiative being effectively implemented; 2) if so, what does the data show on its effectiveness in improving student outcomes? (If the district has already done this, I would very much like to see the results.)

I would like to reassess the programs in place before beginning new initiatives — teachers and school administrators must know that the District is serious about addressing this problem and is not simply throwing out another initiative without thinking through the problem holistically. And finally, from my personal experience teaching at a Title 1 school, I would like to make sure that the District is fully prioritizing chronic absenteeism – and recognizing that any progress on that issue has a direct correlation with mitigating disparities in educational outcomes.

5. What is your approach to school safety, including the role (if any) of law enforcement on campus?

Students, teachers, administrators, and staff must feel safe at school, and parents must know that their children are safe at school. This requires vigilance, training, and practice, which takes forms that include drills, tested and reviewed plans, professional development, and new technologies. As far as I am aware, SMMUSD does not currently have armed police officers on campus, and I have not seen any information to make me think that this should change. However, I think that regular patrols around our schools by law enforcement is important – both to ensure rapid response in the event of a crisis and to protect students on their way to and from school.

6. How should SMMUSD balance the use of screens and digital learning tools with concerns about student attention, social development, mental health, and academic outcomes? What role should technology play in the classroom, and where, if anywhere, should limits be placed?

Digital learning tools can be powerful assets, but they should be used thoughtfully; we should avoid the instinct to defer to digital tools automatically. Technology in our classrooms should clearly enhance lessons, and we must balance its use with careful attention to effects on social development, mental health, and attention span.

7. What is your position on the use of artificial intelligence tools in classroom instruction at SMMUSD? What specific guidelines or limitations, if any, should the District adopt to govern their use?

Artificial intelligence holds both great promise and real risk in our classrooms. On one hand, AI enhanced educational programs offer a chance for students to have personalized instruction that meets them where they are and helps fill in gaps in their learning. On the other hand, the unfettered use of LLMs in the classroom risks reducing students' critical and independent thinking skills. I am very interested to work with district staff, teachers, and parents to begin the process of understanding how we can best harness the promise of AI while protecting our students from very real risks.

8. Do you support a “bell-to-bell” ban on student cell phone use, similar to the policy recently adopted by LAUSD? Why or why not, and what considerations should guide how such a policy is implemented at SMMUSD?

Yes. when administratively possible. At the high school level, I understand that there are administrative/logistical challenges given the sheer number of students who exit campus in a short amount of time. However, I am very much interested in finding ways to make this work.

9. What is your assessment of how the District handled recent changes to the music education program, and what principles should guide decisions involving arts education, program restructuring, and community engagement moving forward?

We need to follow experts, but we need to make sure that our experts are informed by conversations with parents, teachers, and students.

## Community

1. What role should the District play in providing early childhood education, and how should expansion be funded while maintaining accessibility and quality?

Early childhood education is critical. I would like to see the District expand its role in providing access to quality early childhood education, up to the point that the cost of expansion harms our K-12 students. Beyond that point, I would advocate for additional funding from the city, county, and state to expand early childhood educational opportunities.

2. Do you support the [Club's resolution](#) calling for a citywide ban of artificial turf on locally owned public land?

I cannot think of many, if any, instances when the artificial version of something is better than the real thing. This certainly holds true for grass—the real “turf”—and artificial turf.

My understanding is that on our most frequently used fields—which are used by a wide range of organizations (such as AYSO)—usage is so high that grass cannot be sustained. This is a result of the shortage of playing fields in Santa Monica, and accordingly, we should be looking for opportunities to expand the number of fields and related facilities in Santa Monica broadly so that we can relieve that overuse. In the meantime, I understand that artificial turf may need to play a role in keeping these highly utilized fields playable.

Going forward, I would like the opportunity to review data on field usage, and I would be open to hearing from all perspectives.

However, in looking to the future, I do not think we should install artificial turf at our elementary schools unless there is a clear explanation related to usage—and I am not aware of any such explanation.

3. What role should public schools play in preparing students to be engaged, critical thinkers and participants in civic life?

Our public schools play a critical role in preparing students to be engaged, critical thinkers, and participants in civic life. It is important that students graduate from high school with an understanding of how their government works—on the federal, state, and local level—and a recognition that they have a role to play in our shared civic life. There's a reason I started our AP Government course when I was a teacher!

## Ballot Measures

1. Do you support the California Billionaire Tax Act, which would impose a one-time emergency 5% tax on those worth more than \$1B? Why or why not?

I firmly believe that those who have made billions of dollars as a result of the economic opportunities present in the United States and California can and should pay more in taxes. As for this particular ballot measure, I am unsure of some of the particular provisions—for example, on the most basic level, this is a one-time tax that must be spent in prescribed ways. (I don't think that I am alone in these concerns regarding the structure of the proposal; on June 8<sup>th</sup>, the California Teachers Association wrote the following: "After thorough review and democratic debate about the Billionaire Tax Act, our State Council of Delegates - 800 educator representatives from throughout the state — determined that this policy will not provide the sustainable and long-lasting funding that our schools and communities deserve.")

2. Do you support the state ballot measure which would require voters to present government-issued identification when casting ballots? Why or why not?

No. I do not support measures designed to restrict the number of voters in our elections. If the measure automatically registered every eighteen-year-old to vote and provided a free ID, I would be more interested, but I don't think that's what the proponents of this measure have in mind....

3. Do you support the proposed state taxpayer initiative which would limit the ability of local governments to raise revenue through certain taxes and fees including real estate transfer taxes? Why or why not?

No.

4. Do you support the proposed ballot measure which would set aside 25% of the airport land for 3000 units of affordable housing, in addition to the remainder which would become a Great Park? Why or why not?

My understanding is that this will not be on the fall ballot.

## **Additional Questions**

1. 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 would take a multi-pronged approach. First, I would personally engage with leaders in the various political organizations to ensure that there is a regular and consistent flow of information back and forth. Second, I would press the District to make sure that community groups are both engaged when policy proposals are being formulated *and* that new proposals are fully communicated to community groups.

As for the Santa Monica Democratic Club specifically, I have built relationships with many members of the club, and I look forward to consulting with those members and others as I work on policy proposals for the Board. (I have no doubt that members will feel comfortable telling me when the Board is heading in a direction they don't agree with!) If and when the Club or other community organizations want to hear directly from Board members or District staff, I will be more than happy to work to arrange that.

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

- What should be done to stabilize and/or reverse declines in enrollment?

3. Please describe whether and how you used generative AI tools in preparing your responses. If elected, how would you use these tools in governance, if at all?

None of these responses were written with artificial intelligence. I apologize for any typos or instances of repetitions in this response, and I can assure you that those errors are all mine!

I do use artificial intelligence when I am able to ethically use it to improve my own outputs and workflows, and I will bring that approach to governance. For example, when conducting research (whether on the school board or education policy or my work for the legislature), I have used AI as a sort of research assistant, but I always make sure to verify facts myself.