
2011 Candidate Questionnaire
For
Prince William County
School Board Candidates

By

Prince William County Education Reform

<http://www.PWCEducationReform.wordpress.com>

Purpose of the Questionnaire

Prince William County elects an entirely new school board every 4 years. Once a board is elected it will not change for a number of years, which makes selecting a candidate who understands the issues that are important to their constituents that much more important.

Web sites and candidate statements only provide a limited, one-sided view of an individual candidate's opinion on issues they think are important. Debates provide opportunities to contrast each candidate's viewpoint on selected issues, but sometimes the limited response format doesn't offer the depth some issues deserve. So we put together a questionnaire about issues we think are likely to come up in the next few years so that we can all better understand where the candidates stand on those issues and select the person we believe will best represent us.

Administering the Questionnaire

The Candidate Questionnaire will be sent to school board candidates by email on September 30, 2011. Candidates are asked to complete the questionnaire and return their responses by October 7, 2011. We will verify the authenticity of responses we receive and post them unedited on our web site, <http://www.PWCEducationReform.wordpress.com>. Any clarifications or corrections candidates wish to include in their responses after the deadline will also be verified and posted on our web site.

The questionnaire begins with an opening statement and introduction from each candidate and then proceeds to questions for all candidates. Those questions are sorted into broad categories, which are:

- District Administration
- Budget and Transparency
- Relations with Teachers
- Redistricting and School Construction
- Curriculum and Instruction

Additional questions for candidates for School Board Chair are in a separate category.

Candidates are encouraged to provide their answers with as much or little detail as they believe is warranted. To keep things simple and clear, we ask that candidates provide their responses in **blue**.

Who Are We?

We are a group of parents and citizens with a vested interest in ensuring that our schools truly do offer the "World Class Education" Prince William County advertises because our children attend Prince William County Public Schools. We believe that Prince William County Schools offer our children a great education, but that there is room for improvement and issues that deserve attention. We hope that this questionnaire will be useful to both citizens and candidates in that it will clarify candidates' positions on critical issues without campaign slogans.

Questions for all candidates

Candidate Opening Statement and Introduction

Please introduce yourself and explain why you want to serve on the PWC School Board, what you believe qualifies you to represent your district as a school board member, and what issues you'd focus on if elected.

My name is Alyson Satterwhite and I am running for School Board in the Gainesville District. I have a Bachelor of Science in Education from George Mason University. My husband Doug and I have been married for twenty-five years. One of my main roles is that of an active parent to my four children. My two daughters are 2008 and 2010 graduates of Battlefield High School. I have a son who is a senior at Battlefield and a son in the 7th grade at Bull Run Middle School. Involvement in my children's education has always been a high priority from classroom support, to room mom, to fundraising for school events or organizations.

One of the concerns in my district is making sure that the constituents are heard and understood. This is not just about boundary issues, but also making sure that students are receiving the services and support that they need. We need to ensure that we have more fiscal accountability and transparency. We are in tough economic times. Many parents cannot afford more than they are already paying for field trips, sports, school supplies, required reading books. We need to focus on the needs versus the wants. I am passionate about education and I want to make sure that all of the students in Gainesville District and Prince William County Schools have every opportunity to thrive and succeed. I want to provide a voice for the Parents, Students, Teachers, and Residents of Gainesville District.

District Administration

1. The PWC School Board's major function is to provide the policies that guide the school district. The Superintendent is hired by the school board to implement the policies handed down to him / her from the school board and is accountable to the school board.
 - a. Do you believe that the PWC School Board is exercising an appropriate level of control over the school district? If not, what do you believe needs to change?

The school board, as the elected representatives of the people in their districts, has the responsibility for oversight of the school district. There were a few times last school year when the agenda items for school board meetings were not posted online the appropriate number of days prior to the meetings. School board members were urged to make decisions under the pressure of time constraints when I felt in some cases they were not given adequate time and on occasion, adequate information from the school system. This is a concern. From my observations as a parent and candidate, I have seen more transparency recently, but I think there is much room for improvement.

- b. The Superintendent's contract will be up for review soon. How would you rate his performance?

It's a mixed review. Under our Superintendent there have been several new schools that have opened providing much needed classroom space for our students. One design

feature that I know Dr. Walts has added in to our schools is a larger space for our school clinics. The clinics have windows for extra ventilation and are located closer to the school entrances. This was a very thoughtful design addition to PWCS.

On the other hand, Math Investigations was brought into our county as it was in our Superintendent's previous school system. The school administration missed few chances to disparage parent and teacher dissatisfaction with Math Investigations. As Superintendent, he is accountable for how his administration performs.

2. District officials frequently make presentations about the effectiveness of programs they've implemented. Those presentations are supposed to be objective and provided in a timely manner, yet the Office of Accountability reports to the Superintendent who has a vested interest in presenting the results of programs he and his staff have implemented in a positive light.
 - a. Do you believe that it is appropriate for the Office of Accountability to report to the Superintendent? Please explain your reasoning.

It would be interesting if some parts of the Office of Accountability could fall under both the school board and the Superintendent. When you look at all that the Office of Accountability currently is responsible for, it wouldn't make sense to have it all under the school board. It is, however, very important that school board members be informed with presentations and statistics that reflect what is accurately occurring in the PWCS. We all know that too often in business statistics are manipulated to show what a given organization wants to be shown. It is in the best interest of the education of our students, transparency for parents and taxpayers, and for the benefit of the school system to be open and honest. If we are to learn and make adjustments where necessary, this is what is needed.

- b. Do you believe that school board members should accept the assertions of district officials without question or do you believe that school board members should view that information with a degree of skepticism? What steps would you take to verify the completeness and accuracy of information presented by the school district?

School board members do have to spend time in preparation before school board meetings. This is one reason it is so important they receive the agenda items for meetings in a timely manner. Personally if I have a question, I would go, before the meeting if possible, to the appropriate person who would be able to answer my questions on the staff. I am also good at researching when I need more information on a topic. In order to be able to ask questions, you have to be prepared. School board members have a responsibility to be informed and to do their due diligence in preparation.

- c. How would you respond if you were aware that the information presented by the district to the public and school board was misleading or inaccurate or if the district wasn't providing the information in a timely manner?

Misleading or inaccurate information presented as fact is never a good part of customer service. Mistakes do happen, but we need to confront any information that is misleading or deceptive. On August 11, 2011 the Washington Post put out a story

entitled “62% of Virginia schools labeled ‘failing’ under No Child Left Behind” while PWCS put out a News Release “Students Show Progress in Mathematics and Reading; Surpass Many State AYP Targets.” Both stories had similar content and of course the newspaper is working to sell papers. But each story, even the PWCS story, had a spin. PWCS told you exactly what they wanted the public to know. Meanwhile the Washington Post states “In Prince William County, the portion of schools that failed to meet testing benchmarks soared from 34 percent to 75 percent in the past year. And in Loudoun County, it grew from 34 to 57 percent.” So why do we have such a high percentage difference between the PWCS failure to meet benchmarks compared to Loudoun County? What is the accurate story here? Parents and taxpayers need more transparency than this.

Budget and Transparency

1. Determining budgetary priorities for PWCS is a significant responsibility of the school board with funds allocated to PWCS from the Board of County Supervisors and other sources.
 - a. Assume our funding allocations result in a projected budget shortfall. Would you request an increase in property taxes to cover the projected shortfall or would you recommend cuts to programs? If you would recommend cuts or if your request for increased taxes was rejected by the BOCS, what program or programs would you cut or eliminate and why?

I would not request an increase in property taxes. We are in an economic climate where everyone is facing some kind of budget constraint, be it school, job, or home. Prince William County Schools receive 56.75% of the total county revenue each year in addition to federal and state funding. We need to work with the resources we have.

Many citizens have come to me with ideas on how to cut spending in our schools. Several parents have said that the white boards are great, but do we really need that expense in each classroom? And what is the replenishment/refurbishment cost for white boards? Parents are concerned when they see expenditures that are that far above that of household budget items. Another concern that has been brought up many times is the number of staff members in administration at the Kelly Center. I know we have some great people working for our school system doing a wonderful job and I have worked with some of them on school issues. The question is do we have too many directors, specialists and professionals who are not working in our classrooms directly benefiting our students. One PWCS staff member asked me a question about our report cards and interim reports. Why are these still being mailed to student homes in middle and high school when most families have access to a computer? This is a valid question. There are always problems with printing when all PWCS schools try to print report cards at the same time. Doesn't it make sense to only print them for the families that specifically request a printed version? Now of course this means that PWCS has to be ready for all parents in the district to be checking parent portal for report cards at the same time! Whether we are facing a budget shortfall or not, these are the kinds of questions and suggestions that we should always be considering.

- b. True fiscal responsibility isn't just what you do when money is tight, but what you do when you have a surplus of funds. Assume PWCS received a larger allocation

than anticipated. If it was a one time allocation of funds, how would you allocate them and why? If the increased allocation appeared to be the result of an improving economy and was likely to be ongoing, how would you allocate those funds and why?

My first thought for one time allocation of funds would be purchasing computers. This is a purchase that always needs refurbishment and replacement. I would also want to fund programs that currently are not receiving the support they need such as robotics. With an improving economy and forecasts of ongoing improvements I would love to see a reduction in the size of our very overcrowded classrooms. Teacher packages would need to be evaluated. Also a fresh look at the Capital Improvements Program (CIP) would be in order to see if projects can be accelerated.

2. PWCS takes great pride in the fact that our published cost per pupil is lower than surrounding jurisdictions, but some items are excluded from that calculation and there is no real industry standard for how that figure is derived. Should our published cost per pupil reflect actual total outlays, including debt service costs and transfers to the teacher retirement system, or should some items be excluded from that calculation and why?

Without having an industry standard, it can seem like we're comparing apples to oranges with our neighboring counties if we don't know the basis of the calculations of per pupil spending. I would think that it makes sense that a truer picture of the net cost per pupil would include debt service and the total budget. This gives a more accurate picture to our taxpayers and residents of what the real costs are in our county.

Relations with Teachers

1. Many teachers have expressed concerns that they are being bullied by their school administrators to support and implement programs that are backed by district officials even when they believe those program will undermine student learning. Many of our teachers believe that they no longer have the authority to teach their subjects in the manner they believe is best. Do you believe these concerns are valid and, if so, what do you believe should be done to address them?

Yes, these concerns are valid. I have heard from teachers and parents who have shared their experiences with me. I have a great respect for the administrators who trust their professional teachers to teach. The SOL and other measures in their schools back up their successes. A professional educator should always feel free to share their experiences, opinions, and best practices with others. This is what helps teachers sharpen their skills. I want our educators to be able to bring to the classroom all of the effective and proven techniques that they possess. This only benefits our students. To not allow our teachers to voice their opinions, many times based on years of experience, is an infringement on their first amendment rights. Yes we do have a required curriculum to teach. But we have to remember that the teacher in the classroom has the best insights as to how those particular students are learning and what techniques are going to best reach those students.

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2. Many of our teachers have expressed that they fear retaliation from their school administration and district administration if they speak out against programs the district or school is implementing. Would you consider creating some sort of whistle-blower program to protect teachers should they choose to speak out against programs the district or their school administration is planning?

There are some school board members who have done a good job of making themselves available to teachers. I think the key here is for school board members to continue to serve the teachers in their districts as well as their constituents.

3. PWC teachers make about the regional average in salaries but our benefits appear to be above average. It has been several years since our teachers received salary increases and benefits have been reduced. We are hiring an increasing number of new teachers each year and retiring more experienced teachers. Do you believe that these are problems and, if so, how would you address them? Would you ask the BOCS to raise property taxes to pay for an increase in teacher salaries and / or benefits?

Not only are we retiring experienced teachers, but many are also leaving PWCS. I have seen some retention/turn-over issues and I am concerned. Our students and newer teachers benefit from the expertise of these experienced professionals and their leadership. PWCS does have to stay competitive with our neighboring counties with pay and benefit packages. We hear often about the new teacher recruiting, but not anything about why experienced teachers leave. I'd like to know if we're doing exit interviews with employees who leave the system. Then we can better evaluate what can be done to keep this from happening. The advertising that I have seen for new hires looks impressive. I would be interested in seeing some figures on the results versus the expenditures for the advertising outreach.

Redistricting and School Construction / Renovation

With the rapid housing development we saw in recent years overcrowding of schools is an issue – especially in the western end of the county. We're opening a number of new schools in the next few years, which means students' are going to be redistricted. As the focus from a construction standpoint has been on new schools in the west end, a perception has developed that schools in the east end are being neglected.

1. Parents currently serve on the committees to redistrict Elementary and Middle Schools, but not High Schools. Do you believe that parents should serve on the High School redistricting committees?

I do believe we need parent input on the high school redistricting. This is a much larger, more complicated process than elementary and middle school, but we have to remember who our stakeholders are and who we're responsible to. Even if it is a small number of parents representing the affected schools appointed to work with administration, this would be an improvement.

2. Rapid growth and new schools means students have to move to different schools – sometimes several times in their academic careers. Should attention be paid to keeping

students together from Kindergarten to graduation by taking “feeder” patterns into account during redistricting?

I love the sense of community that grows from an elementary school, moving into a middle school, and then on to the same high school. Can we do this successfully with all boundary changes and the existing schools now? It would be extremely difficult. But as we look to more schools, I would like to see this larger sense of community strongly considered.

It was difficult this year to see the Gravely Elementary family split in the middle school boundary changes. This is a newer elementary school (in its fourth year), but it has built a strong sense of “family” in our community. Yes, these students will be back together in high school and play sports together. The other strong consideration is to limit as much as possible the number of boundary changes that an entire community/subdivision is subjected to.

3. How would you address the perception that schools in the east end of the county are being neglected because so much attention is being paid to new school construction which is primarily in the west end of the county?

Schools in the eastern side of PWC are getting refurbished and updated according to the Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) and there are some new schools. The fact is the new construction has to follow the most demand for classroom space. In recent years that has been in the western end of the county. There have to be classrooms in place to accommodate students. Ideally, portable classrooms are a temporary solution, not a permanent answer. Growth has happened so rapidly in Prince William County that the school system has not been able to keep up. Battlefield High School was the largest high school in the state last fall with its extreme overcrowding. The opening of Patriot High School this year has only slightly alleviated the numbers and parents are concerned in the community. Bull Run Middle School has classrooms in portables with 33 students. Those are smaller than the average size classroom. Our building has to continue as needed and where needed.

Curriculum and Instruction

Several years ago PWCS adopted and mandated a controversial instructional program for K – 5 mathematics called TERC or Math Investigations despite the fact that the program was not recommended by the Va. DOE for use as a K – 5 series. There were two major controversies with this program: the instructional approach which is referred to as constructivist, standards based, or reform math; and, central control over instruction as opposed to site or teacher driven instruction. PWCS is currently considering math textbooks again and the final decision regarding new math instructional programs / materials will rest with the newly elected school board.

1. Math Investigations was not reviewed by the Va. DOE for this review cycle and is not on the list of state recommended textbooks PWCS is considering, though we can consider it if the textbooks recommended by the Va. DOE are deemed inadequate. Do you believe it is appropriate for the district to select and use a non-state recommended textbook as its primary instructional material?

I would prefer that the district select from the list of state approved and vetted textbooks. Now, we still have a responsibility to do our due diligence with these textbook

recommendations. Just because the Virginia Department of Education recommends a book, it doesn't necessarily mean that it meets the needs or scope of PWCS requirements.

Math Investigations should not ever again be considered for use in Prince William County Schools. I have been strongly advocating for years that this program does not meet the needs of our students or prepare our students for higher math in middle school and high school. If we are going to prepare our students for future careers in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) then we need to provide a strong foundation in mathematics in elementary school. Math Investigations does not provide that strong foundation.

2. Do you believe that instruction should be centrally controlled with district mandated materials and lesson pacing or that teachers should be given the authority to select and use any state / district approved instructional material on a pace that matches his / her students' needs?

I have been concerned over the strict pacing and control with Math Investigations and other math classes. Teachers have the best insights into the pace and materials that will best match their student's needs. I want our educators to be able to bring to the classroom all of the effective and proven techniques that they possess. They need flexibility to be able to slow down or speed up as needed to make sure that the students are actually "getting it". With consideration that there is set content to be covered in a school year, teachers are the best judges for individual classroom pacing.

3. Do you believe that the instructional approach Investigations follows improved student learning and that the approach should be continued in Elementary School and expanded into Middle School and High School?

Math Investigations teaches from a constructivist learning approach and tries to minimize direct instruction from the teacher. The instructional approach of Math Investigations has struck me as being an inch deep and a mile wide. The spiral sequencing does not allow mastery of content before moving on to the next content area. I'm not saying I have a problem with group time and working with manipulatives in mathematics, those are fine. However, direct instruction is necessary for students to have a basic foundation of information to build on before they can do peer learning and group work. Without this foundation, they are wandering in the dark without a flashlight to guide them.

On the question of continuing the Math Investigations approach in middle school and high school my answer is absolutely not!

In response to concerns that the Math Investigations program was inadequately preparing their children for higher level Mathematics, parents requested that they be given the choice of "opting out" of the district mandated program. This would have forced schools to provide an alternate instructional program to those children whose parents "opted them out". The school board voted this request down in a 4 - 4 split.

4. Should parents be given the choice of "opting out" of controversial instructional programs mandated by the school district? Please explain your reasoning.

I received an “opt out” form at the beginning of the school year for family life education. We receive these every year because some parents believe the content is a concern. So “opting out” already occurs.

I was present at the school board meeting with the 4-4 split vote for the opt-out program for mathematics. It is my belief that if that vote had passed, our SOL scores would have been higher this past year and we would have more students ready for Algebra I in middle school.

Curriculum and Instruction

Ever since the VA DOE mandated the Standards of Learning (SOLs), PWCS has maintained that the objective of instruction in our schools was to exceed the expectations set forth in the SOLs. District officials in Mathematics and English / Language Arts have proposed that the SOLs be the extent of instruction in our schools for 2011 to 2017 and that the objective of instruction in PWCS be designed to ensure the highest proficiency rates on the SOL exams. Increasing the percentage of students achieving an advanced score on the SOL has been characterized by district officials as “icing” and not the objective of instruction in our schools.

5. Do you believe that the objective of instruction in PWCS should be to meet or exceed the state SOLs? If you believe that PWCS should strive to exceed the SOLs, what would you do to ensure that instruction in our schools does exceed the SOLs when district officials have stated that the objective of instruction is to meet the SOLs?

I’ve always considered the SOL’s as a baseline standard, not a goal. The goal when we are educating our students should be to exceed the SOL requirements and challenge our students to learn and excel. The goal of our schools should be to have a majority of our students at the pass advance level, not just passing the SOL. It is discouraging that PWCS now has just the SOL’s as our curriculum. We should not just be teaching to the test. We should be teaching beyond, not settling for what’s easiest.

6. Do you believe that the needs of our advanced learners, those students who are capable of achieving an advanced score on the SOL exams, should be a priority in the district? Do you believe that their needs are being adequately addressed now and will be adequately addressed as our instructional focus is on achieving the highest “pass rates”?

The needs of each and every student at every level should be addressed and be a priority. We need to teach each student at a level that challenges and motivates them to succeed. The job of our school system is to provide a World Class Education. To me this means that every child is valued and encouraged academically.

7. One of the biggest complaints about the SOLs is that we teach to the test. Instruction in classrooms on content routinely ends one or more months before the state exams and consists of reviewing questions from prior exams rather than reviewing the content being tested. Once exams are over students spend their days watching movies and playing games. Do you believe this is a problem and what do you believe can or should be done to rectify this?

In my opinion, the SOL's should either be earlier in the year or right at the end of the year in place of final exams. It is often denied, but the fact is, there isn't a lot happening in many of our classrooms after the SOL's with the exception of preparation for music performances. Parents have come to me and said that their children just can't take watching any more movies. In elementary school, the SOL prep can be very exhausting and intense right before the test. Many of these kids are worn out and burned out after testing. So a very short break after testing is something to be considered, but not the several weeks that that we have remaining now between testing and the end of the school year! It was very discouraging that the State Board of Education did not even give a hearing to the request by several school superintendents to move the SOL test to earlier in the year. I think it is time for county school systems around the state to work together to motivate the State Board of Education to change the system to what would be the best use of instructional time.

Questions for School Board Chair candidates

1. What differentiates the School Board Chair from other School Board Members and how are you qualified to serve in that capacity?

Candidate response

2. The Chairman of the school board has the unique responsibility for setting and enforcing the tone and structure of school board meetings. During the controversy over Math Investigations a group of parents routinely petitioned the school board to consider changing the instructional program. In several instances, which are documented and can be viewed on the local www.bvbl.net site, a few of those parents were named and attacked by school board members during their public comments. For several years one school district publication listed on the PWCS web site identified by name one of the parents responsible for the petition to remove Math Investigations.
 - a. Do you believe that the rules that govern comments by parents apply to school board members and district officials? What would you do as Chair of the School Board if a member in his / her questions or comments appears to be defaming, attacking, or attempting to intimidate staff, parents, or other school board members?

Candidate response

- b. Do you believe a parent should ever be identified by name in a defamatory manner in an official school district publication? What would you do as Chair of the School Board if you were made aware that a parent had been identified as such in an official school publication?

Candidate response

3. School board meetings are organized such that citizen comments on agenda items are provided before staff presentations on those same agenda items. That means that citizens are expected to comment on presentations they haven't seen yet. Would you be willing to consider changing the structure of school board meetings so that they mirror Board of County Supervisors meetings where staff make their presentations on agenda items, citizens are afforded an opportunity to question or comment on staff presentations, and then staff answer questions or respond to comments?

Candidate response