
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.

[Candidate response](#)

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?

[Candidate response](#)

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

[Candidate response](#)

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.

[Candidate response](#)

- 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?

[Candidate response](#)

- 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?

[Candidate response](#)

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?

Candidate response.

- 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?

Candidate response.

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?

Candidate response.

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 to be done to address them?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

3. PWC teachers make about the regional average in salaries but our benefits appear to the 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?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

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?

Candidate response

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.

Candidate response

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?

[Candidate response](#)

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”?

[Candidate response](#)

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?

[Candidate response](#)

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