

---

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.

As a parent of PWC school children, I ran for the Brentsville seat four years ago because I felt that the system wasn't adequately addressing overcrowding and that the administration wasn't listening to the community on the seriousness of the problem. Since then we have come a long way, adding nearly 4,000 elementary and high school seats this fall, with 1200 middle school seats coming online next fall. I have also led efforts to move up dates of future schools in expected growth areas. At my urging, we have improved community communications on our plans regarding school construction, trailers and renovation. I am running again because there is still much work to be done. I think I have been very effective at tackling the overcrowding issue and instituting better planning for future schools. The schools added this year will partially catch us up on students already in the system, but we must continue to address the growth expected homes already approved or in the pipeline. We must also continue to plan with maximum flexibility for the new development that will certainly come, especially in the western end of the county. There are curriculum and textbook decisions currently in progress that need parent and community input and I will make sure that the community's concerns are heard. I also feel I am an effective voice on budget decisions and a strong advocate for taxpayers. I believe the school board would continue to benefit from another term of my consistent conservative leadership.

### 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?

Overall I believe that the School Board is exercising an appropriate level of control over the school district but I believe in any organization there is always room for improvement. The Superintendent is the Chief Executive Officer, responsible for daily operations and performance. As a board we have made several changes over the past few years where we felt things needed tightening up a bit. Examples include:

1. Having the School Board publically discuss its response to the BOCS on proposed residential developments of 100 homes or greater (instead of just the planning staff) has meant that we are better informed on proposed development and the impact on overcrowding. The School Board now can make stronger statements regarding the impact of the development if appropriate.

- 
2. Hiring an external auditor that reports to the SB audit committee for tasking and evaluation purposes.
  3. Hiring a division attorney that reports directly to the School Board and the Chairman.
  4. Not delegating the authority to sign contracts or approve changes orders exceeding the regular limits to the Superintendent during summer months as had been the practice for a number of years.
  5. Changing the policy to allow principals to carry forward all money that they were able to save in their budgets during recent budget years that were especially tight. Previously that money had gone back to central office control.

I believe that there are always areas we could improve, especially regarding more transparency in the budget preparation process.

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

As a sitting School Board member it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the performance review of a Superintendent's strengths or weaknesses in a public forum, just as I wouldn't make public comments related to the reviews of the SAIC employees or the sailors that I supervise.

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.

The Office of Accountability has other responsibilities in addition to reporting on the effectiveness of programs that the administration has implemented. Some of these include providing data analysis and reporting both for staff use and to satisfy state and federal requirements; management of all student and division records; managing and coordinating various tests and assessments including the SOL exams; generating and maintaining school data profiles; assisting schools and departments with finding and applying for external grants; developing and monitoring the school calendar and there are others. These are operational functions that are the responsibility of the Superintendent to execute. As the CEO of the School Division it is appropriate for the Superintendent to report on the performance and execution of the school division to the School Board. If the School Board feels that the Superintendent or his staff is not reporting honestly it is up to the School Board to hold him accountable and up to the voters to hold the School Board accountable. I do feel that the name "Office of Accountability" is misleading and that it could be better named to be more reflective of the nature of the majority of its duties

- 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?

There should always be healthy skepticism within any organization that is reporting on its own performance. This is because there is always an inherent bias such that the organization will frame the reporting to put it in the best light possible. This is simply human nature and I have seen it in military, corporate and government cultures. When I felt that the information presented was incomplete or being misrepresented I did dig deeper to get a more direct feel for the information. During the Math Investigations discussion, I felt that the level of teacher dissatisfaction was being dismissed so I went to the administration building and reviewed the teachers' surveys for myself and found that my hunch was correct. I am also the sole School board member who has invited experts from outside the school division to present on or discuss contentious issues that were under debate or where I felt it was appropriate that we hear from someone outside the school division.

- 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?

I have publically disagreed with and confronted the administration's presentation of information on several issues including but not limited to: the conditions at the original Nokesville Elementary School and the need for a 900-student replacement; the perceptions of parents and teachers on the Math Investigations program; the administration's intentions to use one-time federal funds to hire 180+ additional teachers for a single year before the School Board had an opportunity to discuss it and when there were no answers as to how the funding could be used, what the sustainability of the additional positions would have been and what effects that would have had on out-year budgets.

## **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 have always felt that that philosophy we should take is to establish a balanced budget with the resources that we think we will have based on tax guidance from the county and the expected funding from the state and other sources. If we come up with shortfalls, then we should identify the cutbacks required to meet the budget and present that to the BOCS as our plan. Sometimes we may have a discussion with the BOCS as to how much funding would be required to restore individual services. The BOCS has the ultimate responsibility for setting a tax rate. Regarding what I would cut:

---

The best way to save money and ensure that it is spent most effectively is to push funding and budget decisions down to the individual schools as much as possible. This ensures that the money is spent most directly on the education of students and schools and less is spent on layers of administrative overhead. I would put a hard freeze on overall central office budgets and look for opportunities to reduce central office staffing by re-allocating responsibilities, beginning with eliminating all supervisory positions that have been vacant for an extended period of time. I believe that we should always look for offices that duplicate other functions already handled within other departments. I would eliminate any duplication, closing offices if necessary and re-allocate any left-over responsibilities to other offices. I also believe we spend too much on employee investigations by the Office of Risk Management. This could be handled by existing administrative and HR personnel and would reduce the staff level there, contracting out investigations when absolutely necessary. We also need to evaluate ALL our data-collection programs like “Baldrige in the Classroom” to see if they are providing useful data. These programs take teacher time away from instruction, which is supposedly our core capability.

- 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?

For one-time allocations I would look to use that money for infrastructure improvements that would otherwise come out of future operational budgets, thus freeing up more funds in the future. In the situation where an improving economy with more resources is available over the long haul I would ensure that all kindergarten classes were staffed with full-time assistants and reduce the student-teacher ratio. Of course with improving resources, we would also be able to look at raising teacher compensation.

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?

Both numbers are valuable. Including all costs is a true reflection of the amount of money being spent by the division. However, the only way to compare PWC operating cost efficiency with other school divisions on a per-student basis is to exclude debt service costs for new schools and additions for both organizations. School divisions not experiencing the rate of growth of PWC do not have these same requirements and trying to compare them in this situation would not be useful.

---

## 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?

I do believe that this can be a valid concern and I have stepped in when I felt there were systemic issues. I have also had many conversations with teachers who do feel that they have the authority in the classroom that they need. In individual cases where a teacher feels bullied, they should first address those concerns with their administration or their PWEA representative I also feel teachers should be able to feel completely comfortable confidentially talking to School Board members about their concerns without fear of reprisal.

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?

Retaliation against a teacher for voicing their opinion on the educational merit of a program the district is implementing should absolutely not be tolerated. As a manager and leader I have always valued the opinion of the technical experts and sailors who work for me. Expressing an opinion is different from insubordination, which should not be tolerated either. Whistle blower programs are usually implemented where illegal activities are involved and I don't believe that is what is involved with the above question. I believe we could improve the avenues we currently have for teachers to express their views on our programs and I would support such changes that allowed teachers to express their views without retaliation.

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?

Over the past four years PWCS teachers have received modest pay raises in every year except one and we have avoided major staff layoffs. This is better than most other comparable schools divisions and state government workers. When the local economy eventually improves, it is reasonable to expect that compensation packages would increase appropriately without having to ask for property tax increases.

---

The fact that we are hiring an increasing number of new teachers and retiring more experienced teachers is a result of the phenomenal growth experienced by PWC over the last decade. While it is never ideal to have experienced teachers and staff leave, we live in a region with high mobility as a result of military or government service and other factors. Our housing market rise and fall also contributed to mobility issues. Over the last couple of years we have seen our turnover rate decrease as the economy has tightened up and jobs elsewhere were less plentiful.



---

## 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?

School boundaries are usually the most contentious and emotional issues that School Boards have to deal with. In PWC Elementary and Middle School boundary committees are typically limited to 15 members. When we recently redistricted elementary school boundaries in the Linton Hall corridor I requested that we increase the committee size to account for the fact that we were accommodating two new schools very near each other and affecting the same neighborhoods. I did this in part to avoid the rollercoaster emotions of two separate boundary decisions. In this case, one larger committee worked well.

I am not opposed to the idea of high school boundary committees. High school boundary changes typically affect so many different communities that to try and put together a committee where all communities had representation could be so large as to be completely unwieldy so that problem would need to be solved. We do have a process where parents are given multiple opportunities to see and comment on proposed boundary plans. Fairfax County has recently instituted a Facilities Planning Advisory Council made up of parents and citizens charged with looking at facilities needs and issues, including boundaries, from a system-wide perspective and to increase public awareness and transparency. This is an idea that we should maybe consider implementing in Prince William County.

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?

In theory I think the feeder system concept is a good idea. A strict feeder pattern, however, is not a realistic approach in a county as fast-growing as PWC to try and keep up with the pace of growth. It would be very expensive to implement because a large majority of our schools are not correctly sized for feeder patterns. Our resources are currently focused on catching up and planning for future growth and the feeder system isn’t feasible while we are still growing at such a high rate. Another challenge with a strict feeder system is that neighborhoods are can often be split in order to maintain the pattern while here in PWC we try to keep communities together as much as possible. Although it is not one of the criteria listing in our policy or regulation, I do try to

---

consider keeping student groups together as much as possible when evaluating potential boundary plans.

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?

When the growth was taking place on the eastern end of the county all the new schools were being built on that side and the western end had that perception. We build new schools to accommodate the students brought by the growth wherever that growth may be. We have an ongoing program of scheduled renewals and renovations that is designed to provide maintenance and upgrades to schools on a regular basis and all schools get them on a periodic basis and much of that renovation is scheduled for the eastern end. I support keeping those proposed renovations/renewals on target. Last spring during the budget process we allocated approximately \$1.3 million dollars for technology upgrades with the majority of those funds being spent on the eastern side of the county.

---

## 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 believe that we should consider all state-recommended texts before looking at non-recommended texts. While I agree that the School Board should have the authority to select a text that is not a state-recommended textbook, I would only consider supporting such an option if there was an overwhelming consensus of the selection committee that the recommended texts are unacceptable and an overwhelming consensus on the recommendation. Before supporting any texts not on the state recommended list, I would have to have a very good explanation as to why the ones on the list weren't acceptable and a very clear demonstration of how the one recommended was far superior.

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 stated publically and on numerous occasions that I feel that teachers should have the authority to use whatever instructional materials best enable them to teach their students and that they should have the freedom to adjust pacing as required for their students to master the material as long as they cover the curriculum by the end of the school year.

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?

I do not feel that the constructivist-only approach to math instruction that was implemented produced significant system-wide improvement and absolutely would not support expanding it into the middle and high schools.

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 do believe that parents should have the opportunity to opt out of instructional programs that represent significant changes in instructional philosophy, especially when that philosophy has proven to be controversial and of mixed results. We should not use our students as a testing lab for the latest educational fad to come along without their parent’s consent.

---

## 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?

When the school administration presented their proposed curriculum last spring, I was concerned about an “SOL only” curriculum. So I put forth a motion, which was supported unanimously by the rest of the School Board, to have our administration benchmark our curriculum against that of other school divisions in the region. The result of that exercise was presented to the Board this past month. Essentially it was found that all the school divisions use the state standards as their foundation; however Fairfax County and others explicitly list additional goals in their curriculum for extended learning whereas we scatter our ideas for differentiation and extended learning about in various other documents. We need to address this and the next step should be to include these in our core curriculum where they will be easily available for parents to locate and understand. PWC should not be SOL only.

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”?

I believe that the needs of all students are a priority and that we should be empowering all students to achieve to the best of their ability. We should be focusing on individual student excellence and not on broad-based pass rates at the minimum level. This assures we are addressing the needs of those who need additional help as well as challenging those who exceed standards.

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?

I have publically voiced this concern on several occasions. Unfortunately, much of this problem stems from the Virginia General Assembly’s “King’s Dominion Law” which dictates

---

we cannot start school until after Labor Day and the state department of education's refusal to give PWCS a waiver on starting school earlier. I will continue to lobby our local delegation to repeal this law or grant more waivers. As long as the school system is being assessed on the basis of SOL pass rates and the state is scheduling those SOL exams between mid-May and early June this issue will exist to some extent. However that should not be an excuse. At our level we have to have principals who will enforce our policies of continued classroom learning even after SOL exams are over, helping teachers to come up with creative ways of doing this when the students are mentally checking out. The larger solution has to include alternative SOL testing approaches that de-emphasize a single end-of-year exam. This was proposed by several Virginia Superintendents this past spring and would allow teachers to use their instructional time more effectively. I would support looking into this concept more fully.

---