
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 John O'Leary and I have lived along the Linton Hall corridor for over 10 years. I'm a proven leader in the community and I understand the obligation we have to our constituents. We must be good stewards of the county's tax revenue by making sensible decisions and spend our tax dollars wisely. As a leader in the community, I have worked with various groups and organizations in our district. I hold leadership positions on my HOA Board, in Scouting, church committees, and in local athletics. As a volunteer in these community organizations, I have made strong bonds with many of the residents in our district. I have the reputation as a trusted, dedicated, and effective leader working towards shared goals. As the elected representative to the School Board, I will continue working with these diverse groups to make a difference. I am seeking the Brentsville District seat on the Prince William County Board because I believe we have lost ground with the community oversight of our school system. There is a great deal of resident unrest with some of the decisions and policies of the school board, particularly pertaining to curriculum and new school construction. Our school board has an obligation to the residents to push forward a sensible agenda that is in step with the community.

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?

I believe the School Board can and must do more to control the policies and direction of our school system. We have implemented costly programs that add little or no value to our children's education. I believe the community, made up of parents, grandparents, and all taxpayers has an obligation to ensure our schools are preparing our children for their future. We need to enhance the level of involvement of the community through stronger Advisory Councils and increased volunteers on oversight committees within the Superintendent's office. The School Board also needs to take an active role seeing that these Advisory Councils and volunteer committees are a success.

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

I believe Dr. Walts has done a good job as our Superintendent and has the right mindset by making sure technology is a large part of carrying out our mission to provide the

highest level of education to our children. We have seen test scores rise over the past couple of years and I see that trend continuing in the future.

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 reports to the Superintendent and I don't believe that should change. The Superintendent takes ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of our schools and he/she needs to have the tools and resources to fix any gaps. The Office of Accountability is one of the resources available to the Superintendent's office to effectively manage our school system. However, I believe the School Board needs to have an outside auditor perform the same role and function that the Office of Accountability does for the Superintendent. Our school system should be no different than a private or public corporation that has to answer to a Board of Directors or stockholders. This type of business model works in corporate America and should be used for Prince William County as well.

- 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?

Ronald Reagan, one of our greatest presidents, said it best to Mikhail Gorbachev "Trust but verify". I always view information with a degree of skepticism; I have that mindset to ensure that the information presented is as accurate as possible. If district officials didn't believe their reports and information would be challenged, they will become complacent and mistakes are guaranteed to happen. Whenever I'm presented with new information or a plan of action, I immediately begin to see if I can poke any holes in it. Two objectives are accomplished in doing so: I make sure that the presenter is well-prepared because he/she will be expecting the tough questions and, secondly, if the presenter is well-prepared and can answer all questions to the satisfaction of everyone then the information must be accurate and he/she has proven a solid plan of action.

- 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?

It is my expectation that all information presented by district officials must be accurate to the best of their ability. There are obviously going to be missteps and inaccurate forecasting, but those discrepancies should be due to unforeseen circumstances or socio-economic changes to our region. Any information that was misrepresented, deliberately inaccurate, or misleading will not be tolerated and will have repercussions

up to and including termination. This needs to be understood by the professional staff and a zero-tolerance policy must be taken by the School Board.

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 do not support increasing property taxes to cover up inefficiencies and waste in our school budget. Prince William County schools account for almost 60% of the total county budget and we need to make sure that money is spent wisely. If I were to receive a monthly electric bill that exceeded \$1000, I would not start looking for a part-time job to pay my bills. I would first make sure that I'm not wasting electricity by leaving lights on and running energy-consuming appliances when they're not needed. The same idea applies here we can't ask the BOCS for additional funding unless and until we can prove that the school system is run efficiently.

- 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?

I believe anytime we can put more money toward technology, we should do it whether it is a one-time surplus or sustained over a few years. There are several benefits to a better technology presence in our schools; specifically, we can save money by automating communications and reducing the paper generated by our schools. Fairfax County has piloted an online textbook program, cutting the operating expenses of their schools by purchasing cost-effective updates rather than the newest hardcover editions. They have also eliminated the need to replace textbooks with an average life span of two years. We can also save money by publishing homework assignments and routine communications online, rather than sending paper home with our students.

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?

The formula should be simple, divide the total Prince William County school budget by the total number of students. The total cost of educating our children should include all of the

overhead expenses, including teacher/administrator salaries and total compensation packages, maintenance, utilities, transportation, athletics, and other extra-curricular activities.

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?

I do believe that some teachers feel bullied and we need to create an environment free from any repercussions for those who offer candid opinions. The School Board needs to take an active role in soliciting feedback from those who work closely with our children to make sure we are providing the best experience in the classrooms. As a School Board member, I would initiate teacher forums as a venue for educators and community representatives to exchange ideas and provide feedback.

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?

I support any initiative that gives teachers the opportunity to freely express their opinions on a particular program or initiative. It's no secret that teachers aren't in it for the money; they teach because they like working with our children and enjoy the satisfaction of knowing they had a positive influence on the community. We should listen to their concerns and informed opinion (based on personal experience) to improve our education system. It is the obligation of the School Board to set up a forum where teachers can provide input without fear of 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?

Our increase in hiring over the past years is not necessarily due to retiring teachers, but to the population growth in the county during the past 15 years. Losing experienced educators is a common problem and we need to make sure there is a balance between experience and fresh ideas. I would support a retention program if needed, but would not go to the Board of County Supervisory to ask for an increase in property taxes to pay for this initiative. First of all, I do not believe the BOCS would support an increase in property

taxes to pay for shortfalls in the school budget and, secondly, I believe we can trim waste in our budget to pay for these types of programs.

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 believe anytime we can involve parents and the community in our decision making processes, we should do it. We have a solid base of parent volunteers in our classrooms, so there is no shortage of people who want to make a difference. All redistricting processes should include a boundary committee made up of parents, regardless of the level.

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?

While I believe a “feeder” program is ideal, due to the rapid growth of our county I don’t believe that is feasible at this point. Prince William County has set up an education system to provide a particular curriculum for those who are interested in an area of study. We don’t see this type of program at any of our neighboring counties and I believe this really shows our dedication to providing the type of education our children want and need.

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 building new schools, we are reacting to the growth in the county – nothing more and nothing less. We need to provide a comfortable learning environment for our children and that can’t be accomplished without building new schools in the western part of the county. If we did nothing, we would be debating why the Brentsville and Gainesville districts are so much more overcrowded than the rest 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?

We should select the best textbooks available to our children, regardless of who includes them on an acceptable list or not. We should also recognize that a lot of time, money, and resources go into selecting the best instruction tools and we should take those recommendations seriously. However, if we are going to deviate from the recommended choices, we must be prepared to defend the decision and explain why we went a different route. This is not an easy task but should not deter us either.

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?

We should give our teachers as much latitude as they need to select the best tools to teach our children. I don't see the value in stifling creativity and would applaud teachers who take different approaches or use unique resources to get a point across in the classroom. After all, teaching methodologies in college textbooks are the ideas of those who tried different strategies in the classroom.

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 support Math Investigations and believe it should be removed from mainstream instruction in Prince William County. Not only is it an ineffective style of teaching, we are spending money on textbooks and learning materials that aren't used because very few know how to teach Math Investigations. Whether a teacher has over 20 years of experience, or is fresh out of college, he or she simply does not have the training or expertise to teach to it. If it has a place in our schools, it should be as a specialty program and offered to those who opt for that style.

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.

In the case of Math Investigation, which was so widely contested as an acceptable curriculum, we should have allowed parents to opt out of this curriculum and return to a more traditional style of teaching. I will always support initiatives that put the decision-making in the hands of the parents and community. Not only do parents know what is best for their children’s education, we are taxpayers and should control how our money is spent.

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?

We should be teaching our children higher-level thinking, rather than just trying to meet the minimum level of competency established by the SOLs. Often times, administrators can become so focused on ensuring all students pass the SOLs that they sometimes forget the reason for public education – to teach our children to rationalize and think for themselves. We need to set up teacher evaluations that include several factors in the process. Although SOLs should be a factor in a teacher’s performance, the biggest factor in teacher evaluations should be in-class observations from administrators, peer teachers, parents, students, and a 360 degree self-evaluation as well. I also favor an independent evaluation process done by an unbiased group at least every other year. This group can be an outside company, or a group of school administrators, teachers and parents from a different part of the county.

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”?

We should take into account the needs of our advanced learners, but I don't believe they should receive additional resources that are not offered to mainstream or academically challenged students. Parents play a significant role in the education of their children and, often times, the parents of advanced children have already taken an active role in their child's education from an early age. We should allocate the same resources and funding as any other specialty program in the county.

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?

Complacency is a problem and should not be tolerated in our school system. I understand the importance of reviewing for the SOLs, but we have to make sure we don't stop there. I believe we need to have at least one in-classroom evaluation completed after the SOLs have been taken by the students. This will ensure that all teachers continue teaching and preparing our children for their futures.

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](#)