
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.

I am seeking re-election to the office of Chairman at Large of the Prince William County School Board. I have served on the board for 8 years, the last 4 as Chairman at Large. The main issues facing the district will be budget constraints on educational program, overcrowding and recruiting and retaining the best and brightest teachers. I want to serve another 4 year term to continue the progress we have made in improving Prince William County Schools.

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 the School board is exercising the appropriate level of control. Since 2004, the School Board has been a very active and involved Board. Each Board member tends to gravitate toward particular areas of interest, and fellow Board members tend to give a fair amount of deference to the member to lead such inquiries

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

I think the Superintendent has done an excellent job. He is very responsive to the direction of the Board. It takes 5 Board members to make any decision. When those decisions are made the Superintendent executes the Board's desires.

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 oversees programs throughout the school system at the direction of the Superintendent. It would be very expensive for the Board to have an independent Office of Accountability that would oversee the Superintendent's Office of Accountability. The only reason to do so would be if the Board believed that the Superintendent was consistently lying to the Board. I do not believe this is the case.

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- 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 should always have a healthy level of skepticism, and some of that has to do with the office or individual presenting the information. If there is a good track record from a particular office or individual about information being provided to the Board, there is less need for skepticism or doubt. Based on the amount information Board members receive it is very difficult to verify the completeness and accuracy of every piece of data we receive. I use external sources from government, private industry and individuals if there is data that I receive that I question.

- 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 would call that to the Superintendent's attention and require an explanation and correction if necessary.

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?

We must always work within our budget constraints, and our revenue sharing agreement with the BOCS determines the range of our revenue for each budget year. I will never request an increase in property taxes, as the School Board does not have taxing authority. Cuts to programs to meet budgetary goals depends on the size of cuts. We have very few programs that are individually multi-million dollar programs. The bulk of our budget goes to personnel costs.

- 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 always support the use of one time funds for capital improvement projects, such as moving up a school or a renovation, or major acquisitions, such as moving up the

acquisition of buses. I believe that if our revenue increases we need a balanced combination of increases in capital spending along with increases in salaries for employees.

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?

All of our budgets are published, so the costs can be established any number of ways. When we provide public information on our budget, we try to match our figures with those of other published information to the best of our ability. We could certainly have any number of per pupil cost algorithms to satisfy a variety of comparisons.

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?

Any allegation of bullying by employees is serious and needs to be investigated. It has been my experience over the past 8 years that employees who have been placed on action plans will often refer to the implementation of the plan as bullying. However, anytime an administrator is bullying a teacher, those situations should be brought to the attention of a Board member.

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 don't believe there needs to be a formal program but rather spreading awareness that members of the Board will listen to employees in this situation and will ensure that there is no retaliation in legitimate situations.

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 teachers have actually received salary increases in 3 of the past four years at a time when many jurisdictions were laying off teachers. We have not laid off any teachers for budgetary reasons. We have little control over the teachers who leave, and they leave for many reasons – retiring, moving away, changing careers, deciding to have a family, and a host of other personal reasons. We want to retain the very best teachers, and we want to recruit the very best teachers. For instance, last summer we hired about 600 new teachers from a pool of over 40,000 applicants.

We have a revenue sharing agreement with the BOCS. We have lived within that BOCS based on the tax rate direction of the BOCS. Each year we present our programmatic needs to the BOCS, and they make a tax rate decision. The source of funds to the school system is driven by the revenue sharing agreement and the BOCS tax policy decisions. I respect the BOCS's authority and mission with regard to tax rates and tax policy.

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?

It is my understanding that parents do serve on High School redistricting committees. Parents should serve on EVERY committee that the School Board authorizes to provide advice to the Board on any significant policy matter.

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?

Keeping students in neighborhoods together through their academic careers is one of the policy directives for boundary committees and to the largest extent possible we should try to keep children together as they move up through the school system.

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?

This is a misperception. We spend more money per student from our operating budget on schools in the east of the county than we do in the west. This is often a function of demographics, as schools in the east tend to have more Title I students and more ESOL students, which receive supplemental funding. This is also a function of where growth is occurring in the county, which is now primarily on the west end. During the many years when growth was occurring on the east end, people who lived in the west believed that the east end was receiving disproportionate attention. We also have an aggressive schedule of regular maintenance and renovations for our older schools, which tend to be in the east of the county. Overall, the Board in my opinion has done a good job of balancing the geographic regions of the county and making decisions in the best interests of all of the children of Prince William 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?

In general, I believe it is in the Board's authority to select a text that is not on the state list, in accordance with Virginia DOE regulations. Whether a particular text is appropriate is a fact based, case by case inquiry. In some situations it will be appropriate and in others it won't be appropriate.

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 believe that the School Board and the Administration need to empower teachers to teach. Each teacher will have a different style and approach, and each school community will be different. I believe that each school and each teacher should use the tools, methods and pedagogy that best serve their students. This cannot be directed from a central authority. Once a curriculum is established, teachers should be allowed to teach. Adherence to academic orthodoxy is almost never a solution for success.

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 believe that some students may succeed using a "pure" investigations approach. I think some students may succeed using a "pure" traditional approach. I also believe that many students succeed in a common sense, balanced approach. In my opinion, a traditional approach should be the basic core, with elements of Investigations as supplements. I believe that parents should be able to choose from among those three approaches. I will not support an expansion of constructivist math as a central program of instruction at middle and high school levels.

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.

Yes – as the person who made the motion for the “opt out” I still believe in this approach. My answer to the previous question spells out my position.

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 always strive to exceed the SOLs. There has been much discussion lately about the shift in curriculum to match state SOLs. Virginia state SOLs have been significantly overhauled, providing significantly more rigor. IN the end, our curriculum must at least meet these state standards. However, the standards in Virginia now are among the highest in the country, as I understand the changes. We will be able to see what the overall impact is to student learning with this shift. If the change is not conducive to student learning I will seek a change to them.

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 Board must balance the needs of all our learners, including special education/special needs students, average students and exceptional students. Some schools have better opportunities for advanced learners than others, and this is a function of site based management and community needs. I believe that with some of the curriculum changes being made that there will be more opportunities for advanced learners.

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?

As a Board member and a parent it makes me angry to hear about students watching movies after the SOLs. I think some schools are better than others about making post-SOL instruction time meaningful. I have expressed my displeasure in public and in private to the Superintendent and I believe overall that movie watching has been reduced after SOLs.

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?

I have served as Chairman for four years now, and I have overall 8 years on the Board. While the Board Chair has only one vote, the Chari has responsibilities for setting agendas, making appointments, and for presiding over meetings. I believe my performance and experience speak for themselves.

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?

During the Investigations controversy, on a number of occasions I ruled Board members out of order, as well as podium speakers on both sides. I believe that individual Board members, who have constituencies of their own, must regulate and control the content of their speech. If Board members cannot conduct themselves with decorum, their constituencies will register their disapproval. As Board Chair, I cannot pick and chose content to squelch, and wide discretion is given to board members. The Board has rules for podium speakers and I have enforced those equally without regard to content.

- 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?

No one should be defamed in a school publication or communication, and if I am aware of it I will express my concern to the Superintendent and staff. With only one vote, I must rely on at least 4 other Board members agreeing with me if the Superintendent or staff must be directed to do, or refrain from doing, something. During the Investigations controversy, the Board was split 4-4.

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?

I am satisfied with the current structure for citizen comment. Citizens can always come back to a future meeting or submit questions through their district representative or the Chair for clarification.