

Dear Candidates

Below are questions for you gathered from discussions on the Prince William County Education Reform Blog and facebook page. We tried to keep our questions brief because we want to hear from you. We hope that your responses to these questions will help citizens get to know you better and understand your opinions on the issues we believe are facing our school division.

All candidates will receive the questions by Tuesday September 8, 2015. You can type your responses directly into this file or place them in a separate file, whichever you prefer. Responses are due to me by email at ka0993@aol.com by 9 pm, Monday September 14, 2015 and will be published on the 15th. Responses received after 9 pm on September 14th will not be published.

We appreciate the time and attention it will take you to answer these questions. Please answer them to the best of your ability, with however many words you believe are necessary.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Kim Simons
Founder, PWC Education Reform blog

Questions for Candidates for the Prince William County School Board

1. Who are you?

Please introduce yourself and explain why you're running.

I am Betty Covington, Potomac District School Board Representative. I am running for re-election because I wish to continue serving on the School Board. I want to help ensure that we provide the best education possible for every student. I also want to see the completion of projects that I have helped implement.

2. Commitment to the job

Representing the citizens of this county on the school board will consume many hours of your time. You'll be expected to research complex issues with no staff support in a short period of time. You'll be expected to respond to citizens concerns and e-mails promptly, attend events at schools that your children don't attend, and sit through meetings that sometimes last until the wee hours of the morning.

What have you done to demonstrate that you understand the level of work necessary to perform this job? How many school board meetings have you attended in the last year? How many had you attended before you decided to run? Have you attended a budget or CIP work session?

I have served on the School Board for the last 12 years. I have faithfully attended Board meetings and functions as an active member. My desire to continue to serve is a testament to my commitment.

3. Top Priorities

If you could wave your magic wand and make one thing happen immediately, without regard for cost or politics, what would that be?

The one thing I would make happen, without regard to cost or politics, would be to employ more teachers to reduce class size.

If PWCS received \$20 million that would be provided on an annual basis in perpetuity and was not restricted, what would you do with that money?

I would build more schools, hire more teachers to reduce class size, and give employees better salary increases.

If you had to cut \$10 million from the budget, what would you cut?

I would reduce top level positions, reduce costs for sports, and reduce costs for testing.

4. Class Sizes

Do you believe classes in PWCS are too large, too small, or just about right?

If you believe class sizes are too large, do you believe they need to be reduced? If so, what is your plan for determining the appropriate size and bringing class sizes down, including paying for it?

I believe class sizes are too large. My plan to reduce class sizes would be to look at state requirements and lower pupil/teacher ratios below the state. First, I would lower class sizes in the economically disadvantaged schools. These students need more one-to-one instruction. I would look at schools' test scores and assign more teachers to schools with low performance ratings. I would pay for the class size reduction by following suggestions made in Question No. 3.

5. Planning / CIP

Looking forward, do you believe PWCS is adequately planning for student growth?

If not, where do you think those plans are inadequate and what changes would you propose to address those deficiencies?

I believe our school system is always planning for student growth. Our planning office keeps up with the Board of County Supervisors (BOCS) approval of housing developments. A formula is used to predict the number of students that will enroll from each development. Considering budget constraints, the new schools and additions to older schools are then scheduled for completion.

6. Transparency

Lack of transparency in the process used to propose and amend school construction projects has resulted in the community losing trust in the school division. Ferlazzo Elementary and the pool in the 12th high school are examples of that lack of transparency.

Do you believe the process used to inform and solicit input from community about school development in their area is adequate? If you believe it is inadequate, what would you change?

As we have heard from citizens, I believe there should be more transparency. Our school system has a process in place to inform citizens and solicit their input when making decisions about school development.

7. Special Education

Do you believe special education is adequately funded and supported in PWCS? If not, what areas do you believe are underfunded or inadequately supported and where would you look to find sufficient resources for it?

I believe special education is supported in PWCS. We must meet legal requirements regarding our special education students. Funding is a concern for the department of special education, as well as it is with many other departments. I believe the speech and language department was under-funded, resulting in large caseloads. Improvements have been made with additional speech therapists employed. I would look for additional funding from the suggestions in Question No. 3.

8. New Directions

Students attending New Directions currently do not have transportation to or from school. They have to ride public transit, take cabs, or have their parents drop the off and pick them up. Do you believe PWCS should provide transportation for students attending New Directions? If so, would you vote to direct staff to ensure that transporting these students is a priority for the 2016 – 2017 school year?

I would like more discussion from the total School Board concerning transportation for New Directions. Most students attending New Directions have been assigned to the school due to infractions at their base school. The alternative school keeps many students from being suspended or expelled. I am flexible and would like more discussion as this would have a budget impact.

9. Compensation

Do you believe our faculty and staff are adequately compensated? If you believe compensation is inadequate, how would you propose increasing it, and how would you pay for it?

I believe our teachers are inadequately compensated. In the classroom is where “the rubber meets the road.” The teachers are the ones held accountable for instruction and test scores. I feel they should be paid higher salaries. All other personnel is support to the teachers. We need to encourage our BOCS to allocate more funding to better compensate our teachers.

10. Classroom Autonomy

In recent years there has been a movement, both in PWCS and across the nation, for lesson pacing to be defined by central administration and mandated through common assessments that must be given within a set date range. This has left teachers with little ability to adapt lesson pacing to suit their personal instructional style and their students’ needs.

What are your thoughts on this movement? Do you believe it will improve student learning or do you believe it should be scaled back?

I believe in classroom autonomy to a certain degree. There must be lesson pacing to teach the curriculum. Teachers need flexibility to assess and know when to re-teach or move forward.

11. Zero Based Budgeting

Do you agree or disagree with the school board's vote on zero-based budgeting? Do you believe any savings will be discovered as a result? Which departments / schools do you believe should be examined next, and why?

I agree with zero based budgeting. There could possibly be more savings, or possibly more costs. It depends on what is determined as the needs and priorities of the division.

12. The Budget

Do you believe the process used to review and adopt a budget should be changed? If so, what do you think can be done better and how would you change it?

Do you believe that the School Board should accept the school division's proposed budget without adjustment, because the division and their staff know what's best and it's not the school board's job to nickel and dime things?

I believe more work sessions on the budget are needed. I do not believe the School Board should accept the proposed budget without adjustments. In fact, I don't recall the Board previously doing that. We have always made adjustments, as we work through the budget process.

Do you believe there are areas where savings can be found in the budget, and, if so, what are those areas?

I have previously listed areas where savings could possibly be found. See Question No. 3.

Do you believe there are areas in the school division that are underfunded, and, if so, what are those areas and should funding them be a high priority for the school board?

Yes, I do believe there are areas that are underfunded. For example, I have previously listed special education and teachers' salaries as being underfunded. See Question No. 7 and No. 3.

What are your thoughts on the citizen budget advisory committees?

I feel citizen budget advisory committees are helpful, if the Board member and citizens in their district have the desire and time to hold meetings.

13. Strategic Plan

Do you believe the goals and objectives stated in the PWCS Strategic Plan should be the goals and objectives of the school division? If not, assuming you could change it, what changes would you make to it?

I feel the goals and objectives stated in the Strategic Plan should be the goals and objectives of the school division.

14. The Superintendent

What do you believe should be the Superintendent's goals and objectives for the 2016 – 2017 school year?

The Superintendent's goals and objectives for the 2016-17 school year should be to lead the school division to continue to be a World-Class educational system.