

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 Responses received after 9 pm on September 14th will not be published.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

Who are you?

Please introduce yourself and explain why you're running.

My name is Joseph George. I am a 10-year Veteran of the United States Army, more than half of it, I was in leadership positions and was a Paratrooper. I am a native New Yorker, but once we purchased our home in 2008, I declared to my wife of nearly 15 years, we would not move anymore. The house I grew up in since 1973, my mother still lives in. That will always be a "home" I can go back to, and now Dale City is "home" for my three daughters. My daughters are the main motivations as to why I do what I do on a daily basis at work and one of the biggest reasons why I have decided to run for the Neabsco District of the Prince William County School Board.

As the Minnieville Elementary Advisory Council Chair, I have been involved with the improvement of the Eagles' education (our students there), upgrading of the teachers' work environment, and the overall charting of Minnieville Elementary's legacy for about six years. Numerous teachers, staff, and parents have expressed how my leadership would be valued as their representative on the School Board. As my tenure at Minnieville comes to a close (my youngest daughter is in her last year there), this is a prime opportunity to transition from Advisory Council to School Board, and make a positive impact on my District and within Prince William County.

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 been a dedicated volunteer within Prince William County Schools (and three different sports leagues) for over ten years. I have been to every School Board Meeting (with the exception of one) this calendar year, which was when I decided to run. Prior to that, I have gone to four or five, as topics came up that I was interested in, as well as seeing what a Board Meeting was all about. I have attended a Budget/CIP Work Session this year as well.

I have an extremely vital job working at the Pentagon as a Supervisory Criminal Investigative Analyst and even though this responsibility will keep me away from home longer, my family understands the importance of being a School Board member. I tend to answer emails fairly quick and return phone calls as well. I enjoy attending events in schools other than my own, since it helps me learn how operations function at other schools. Best practices at all schools need to be spread around, so that tasks that are not working can be corrected, with the help of others.

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?

If there was one “magic” thing that I wished I could do immediately, that would be to ensure that every student graduates and is prepared for the next step in their life, whether that is seeking higher education, trade school, or going into the work force. The school district, parents/guardians and, students need to work together for the student’s benefit, we can come close to waving that magic wand for real.

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 like to ensure that the SPED programs are properly funded, so that they get the support that they require, and have been agreed on by the school district. We need to have the staff on-hand, so they do not have to float between so many schools; so the speech, vision, and physical therapists are not rushing their current appointment to get to their next one.

I would like to see the trade skill classes come back. Woodshop, automotive repair, electrician, and agriculture need to come back to PWCS. This will allow those students that are not college-ready to achieve certification in a trade that can carry them on for decades.

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

I would cut ineffective programs, those that are either underutilized or are not giving us enough return on our investment. The requirement for a needs-based prioritization from each school is desirable to determine where the cuts could be made.

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?

The class and grade would determine as to whether a class size is too large, small, or just right. Many classes within PWCS are above capacity and the number of students per class within the Neabsco District are too large. The “appropriate size” would be difficult to be determined without the input from teachers, administrators, and regional experts in education. Taking all of those data points will help determine what the correct amount of students in each class (subject and grade dependant) would be. Reducing the number of students per class would require more space, which many schools do not have, and more teachers, which is another issue that we have to address. Paying for it is again determined by community input/support and dialogue with our educators.

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 community’s growth has not kept in mind where the students coming in would learn. We have the responsibility to educate the children of Prince William County and I would be accountable for those that have chosen to make the Neabsco District their home. I will work closely with my Board of County Supervisors Representative, John Jenkins, to determine where the expansion in our community will be and express to him where issues may arise, based on proposed student growth. Then we will collectively plot a course of action to reduce or eliminate those issues. Town Halls will be held to draw in community input and support.

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?

I believe the processes that are in place to inform and solicit input from the community are adequate, but it has not been used properly. One consideration is when Town Halls are held, they will allow as many people as possible to attend, but also in multiple locations. The more opinions that are received, the better the community’s voice will be, but that may not be enough. There are the voices that chose to remain silent, for a variety of reasons. How do we hear them? We bring the Town Halls to them by going to the area churches, community centers, bowling alleys, barber shops, beauty parlors, fitness centers, etc. We have to be prepared to hear what we do not agree with.

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?

From everyone that I speak to that has a child in special education (SPED) or works within SPED, the answer is a resounding “no”. Hopefully my goal of keeping the best and brightest teachers within PWCS, which goes for our specialists as well, will begin to solve this problem. This also goes back to establishing a needs-based prioritization from each school, based on their SPED population.

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?

We are responsible for educating ALL PWCS students and these are the students most likely to not receive a high school diploma and will make it difficult to become a productive member in society. If we can provide the skills trade education to this population, that could go a long way of accomplishing that goal. The question is will the New Direction students be committed to their education as long as they have a ride to school? If that commitment comes from the students, I would request staff to provide transportation to these students next school year.

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 it is the common consensus that faculty and staff are grossly underpaid. When teachers decide to give up working in PWCS to teach further south (where it is less expensive to live and lower salary) or up north (where the cost of living is slightly higher, but so is the pay), then there is a problem. Compensation is considered more than just salary, and since raises do not appear to be on the horizon right now, I am looking at tuition-replacement programs (TRPs) and teacher’s aides (TAs). Many teachers are not certified in PWC and are able to justify a competitive salary once they are, but may not have the funds to do so. TRPs would help assist those teachers to become certified and command a higher wage. Additionally, many teachers and some administrators that I have spoken to have indicated that they would forgo a raise, if that meant some teachers could keep their jobs, but the classroom teachers need some relief. TAs could be an acceptable solution, even at the high school level. TAs would eliminate some of the trips teachers have to take out of the classroom or could provide them more one-on-one (or small group) attention that some students need. Furthermore, those TAs could

start the process of becoming full-time teachers, to help fill the ranks of those teachers that have retired, seek employment elsewhere, or achieve leadership positions within PWCS. This would be considered a better cycle of teachers into and throughout PWCS.

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?

The stimulation of student imagination comes directly from the classroom teacher. We need to provide those teachers more opportunities to adapt their lesson plans to what appears to work for their students. What works in one classroom should not be expected to work in another. Student progress should be considered more important than test scores. This will make evaluation of instructors difficult if you are gauging one against another, unless the progress of the student is a measuring stick, coupled with test scores.

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 that the school district should use zero-based budgeting. Zero-based budgeting helps in the identification of wasteful expenditures, as well as it can be used for suggesting alternative courses of action. Even though zero-based budgeting is more time-consuming than incremental budgeting, it forces departments to identify their mission and their relationship to overall organizational goals. If the zero-based budgeting could not be conducted across the board with all departments, then the school division should show the leadership and the commitment to this by setting the example and conducting it themselves. The process would remain transparent and set the example for the rest of PWCS to follow.

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?

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

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?

What are your thoughts on the citizen budget advisory committees?

Until we get to the point of everyone conducting a zero-based budget, we need to stick to our Strategic Plan and only make slight adjustments, not re-doing the budget every year, again, unless we are doing a zero-based budget.

I would not consider the School Board asking questions and possibly making adjustments as “nickel and diming” the process, because this needs to be a team effort. Even though the division and their staff should “know what’s best”, there should be no issue in asking clarification questions, test assumptions, and challenge theories. We want to ensure that everyone is on the same page and that no questions come out after the fact.

I believe there are areas in the budget that we can find savings, but that venture will be found during the zero-based budgeting process. It forces efficient allocation of resources, since it is based on needs and benefits, rather than history, as well as it should determine whether or not an office has an inflated budget (and may not truly know it).

The school division consistency underfunds and understaffs special education. Even though I am not saying that special education funding needs to be a “high priority”, but it does need to be emphasized better, especially with hiring and supporting the staff that provides for those students. Another underfunded area is the trade skills. We need to prepare those students that are not “college-ready” to be “employment-ready”, and those trade skills can be an avenue for that. Plumbers, electricians, carpenters, and farmers are employees we all need, but are not promoted through the school division. It needs to be.

I believe a citizen budget advisory committee could be vital to the entire budgeting process, especially since those involved in these committees volunteer to be a part of it, so they are donating their own time for the benefit of the project. These committees could be set up for a district or county-wide project. This is another way of remaining transparent in efforts and getting the community involved in the budgeting process.

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 believe that the goals and objectives stated in the Prince William County Public Schools Strategic Plan FY 2016-2020 are accurate and are in line with my three-part intent of, providing the best education for our students, keeping the most capable teachers within our school district, and ensuring that our district members, both parents and tax payers without children in the school district, have a voice on decisions made that impact spending.

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 – 2017 school year should be in line with the Prince William County Public Schools Strategic Plan FY 2016-2020 by facilitating the accomplishment of those goals and objectives by principals and their administration. The Superintendent should ensure that the principals are placed in the right situation and are properly trained to handle the unique situations that a particular school represents. Those successful principals should provide advice to those that may be struggling, as well as mentor those personnel being groomed for greater responsibility.