

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](mailto:ka0993@aol.com) by 9 pm, Monday September 14, 2015 and will be published on the 15th. Responses received after 9 pm on September 14<sup>th</sup> will not be published.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.

*I have lived in the Occoquan District for 15 years. My sons attended Prince William County Schools; my older son, Austin, attended Occoquan Elementary School, Antietam Elementary School, and Lake Ridge Middle School and is a 2014 graduate of Woodbridge High School and just completed his first year at UVA. My younger son, Parker, attended Occoquan Elementary School and Antietam Elementary School and received homebound services before he passed away at the age of 9. The School Board is comprised of 8 members, and while, as a group, they represent the County and have to consider the system as a whole, each member is elected to speak on behalf of one district. The Occoquan District is unique in its needs and concerns, and our District deserves to have a representative on the Board who will listen to those who live here and whose children attend school here and who will serve as their voice in the decision making process. Above all else, I believe that the purpose of the School Board is to serve the students first. I want to be elected to the School Board because our school system needs individuals who are not driven by personal conflicts or personal agendas, or a desire to wield the power behind the position like a sword. We need a representative from the Occoquan*

*District who will focus on the schools in our district and will speak up for the needs and concerns that are unique and specific to all of our schools and all of our students, and I know that I am the right person for the task.*

### **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 work in a public school system, and I understand the importance of budgeting my time and responding to citizens' concerns in a timely fashion. I do this on a daily basis as a high school assistant principal. School Board members also have to be available to hear the concerns brought forward by all stakeholders, to gather the facts, and to foster positive relationships built upon trust. I recognize the time commitment I am accepting if elected to the School Board, and I am fully prepared to take on the responsibility with integrity and professionalism. With that in mind, I have always been committed to supporting the schools in our county. I have attended multiple events at schools not attended by my children, including School of Excellence celebrations, All-county Chorus and Art Shows, and PTA events such as movie and family nights. My children are no longer in the Prince William County School system, but this hasn't prevented me from supporting the schools.*

*I have attended all of the School Board meetings since I started considering running for the Occoquan District seat, as I wanted to have a better sense of the workings of the Board before making a commitment. Prior to considering to run for School Board, I attended the School Board meetings a few times each school year. I attended a budget work session both last Spring and the Spring before.*

### **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 I had a magic wand, FIRST, I would update all of the existing schools in the county, bringing each school up to the standards set by the new buildings in our county, and ensuring that the schools are large enough and equipped to handle their students, not just now, but in 5-10 years.*

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?

*If there were a “spare” \$20 million to spend, that we wouldn’t have to worry about losing after a few years, I would focus on two needs. First, I would identify a portion to support compensation for employees in order to attract and retain a quality workforce. Additionally, I would boost the vocational and technical education opportunities in Prince William County. I would establish programs that allow students to complete the core classes they need to complete their high school diploma while taking classes that give them practical, hands-on learning experiences and internships in fields such as culinary arts, auto mechanics, plumbing and electricity, and computer science. Students would graduate from high school having completed the competencies needed to either enter the workforce or to continue with their education in their chosen field.*

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

*My campaign isn’t based on the premise that I have all of the answers to the budget woes in our county, but on the fact that I have a current understanding of the real workings of the schools and their teachers and staff. I will take my experiences and expertise as an educator into every decision that has to be made with regards to budget, as well as a tax paying citizen who understands the importance of responsible stewardship when spending public funds. That being said, budget cuts will be identified through data and by the priorities set forth in the strategic plan that are in the best interest of the students.*

### **Class Sizes**

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

*Student to teacher ratio must be addressed, especially in the formative years, as a student’s success is determined, in large part, by the educational foundation he or she receives. To address this issue, we have to continue to revisit the Strategic Plan that should drive the decisions within our school system. Our decisions have to be driven by facts and data. Based on the report that came out of the Project STAR research study in Tennessee, until the student to teacher ratio can be reduced to lower than 18:1, long-term effects on increased student achievement are not obtained. We also have to recognize that lowering class size is not an immediate fix. The positive effects of this approach take 2-4 consecutive years to be achieved. Reducing class size is a concern the School Board will be facing for a very long time. The more immediate concern, in my opinion, is that many of our schools are over-crowded, and those that aren’t face the potential to be in the near future. To make matters worse, the resources and facilities available in the schools throughout the county are not equitable, creating an inequity in the education our students receive.*

*My experiences in public education and with different school districts have given me the ability to recognize the importance of having a strong support system within the county and having the right people in those positions to maximize the teachers’ and administrators’ ability to support student learning and success. It is also critical to recognize that we need highly qualified people in direct contact with our students day in and day out, and we need to ensure that only the best people are working with our students.*

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?

### **Planning / CIP**

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

*No, I do not believe PWCS is adequately planning for student growth. The current overcrowding problems throughout the county and the inadequate availability of resources in some of our schools are evidence of that fact.*

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

*The problems occurs when the Board of County Supervisors and the School Board don't work in conjunction with one another to plan for the growth in the county. The Board of Supervisors encourages businesses to come to Prince William developers to build in Prince William. This brings jobs and revenue into the County. This also brings families into the county who have children who need to have a seat in a school where they feel welcome and safe to achieve to their fullest potential. Addressing the deficiencies has to begin with communication and a commitment to work together to plan for the future, not just for tomorrow, between the two Boards.*

### **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 12<sup>th</sup> 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 communication is a struggle at every level in the school system. I also believe that the school system has put processes into place to ensure clear communication and transparency in their decision-making. The school system uses the internet, social media, print media, and robo-calls, along with open School Board meetings and town hall meetings to share information with the public and to encourage public participation in the decision-making process. However, based on my observations while attending School Board meetings, I do believe that the processes in place to ensure transparency must be followed more closely. Actions of the School Board need to be out in the open, with adequate time for data collection, community input, and discussion before a vote takes place. This is not what I have observed in recent months.*

*The question I encounter daily is how do we get more community members involved, and how do we ensure that information being shared in the communities is accurate and up-to-date?*

*My approach is to utilize every resource available, to keep up with the times, to continue to appeal to citizens to get involved and stay informed, and to provide citizens with both*

*electronic and face-to-face opportunities to ensure their ability to provide their input through various means. The School Board also has to schedule work sessions and keep to meeting agendas on a reasonable time schedule to make participation by community members more realistic. Budget work sessions that begin at 9:30 and end at 1:00 in the morning are not conducive to public input.*

### **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?

*Special Education is underfunded, when you consider the intense needs of the students who receive Special Education services and the ever-increasing demands placed on our staff and teachers. Every school needs to have full-time resource professionals, including social workers, psychologists, speech therapists, and school counselors. Too many of our support staff are split between 2 or more schools, severely inhibiting their ability to be effective. Additionally, our Special Education teachers are expected to take on caseloads that are becoming too large to provide the individualized attention our students need and deserve. Where I would look to find sufficient resources for Special Education goes back to the question of budget. Funding additional resources for Special Education is an immediate concern, based on current data provided to the School Board in recent months, and budget decisions must be prioritized based on data.*

### **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 do believe that students who are enrolled in New Directions should be provided with transportation. I also believe that the county should provide transportation to students who choose to attend a high school other than their base school in order to participate in a specialty program like IB or Engineering. New Directions is a needs-based program for students who have demonstrated little success in a traditional school setting. Likewise, our specialty programs are available to meet the needs of students who are driven to participate in the arts or engineering or a program like AP or IB. If we offer the programs for our students, we contradict ourselves by limiting student participation by not providing them with transportation.*

### **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?

*It is nearly impossible to equate a dollar amount to the work our faculty and staff do for our students and our communities each and every day. However, I don't believe our faculty and staff are adequately compensated. Increasing compensation requires making a commitment to guarantee a step and COLA every year. Additionally, we have to commit to keeping our beginning salary and our pay scale competitive with comparable school systems. Finding the funds to ensure these actions goes back to making budgetary decisions that are driven by priorities and data and are in the best interest of our students. Attracting and retaining a quality workforce is in the best interest of our students; having highly qualified teachers in every classroom is the number one factor for student success; and compensation must be a priority.*

### **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?

*Accountability is critical to meeting the needs of every student. Administering common assessments within a set date range ensures a system of check-ins to gauge the students' mastery of the curriculum as well as their areas of weakness. What we have to do within this system is change our mindset that learning ends once an assessment is given. Common assessments and pacing guides have to go hand-in-hand with a mastery approach to learning.*

*Once a common assessment is given, teachers need to analyze the data to determine which standards need to be retaught and reassessed. Learning is not linear for all students; some students require that we spiral back and reteach to ensure their success.*

### **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?

*The problem with zero based budgeting is that it doesn't allow for mid-course corrections when data shows that needs and priorities have changed within a given budget cycle. We all experience this in our own households. We establish an account to save for our summer vacation to Disney, and then the hot water heater quits heating water. Under the zero based approach, we wouldn't be able to move money from our vacation fund into our home improvement fund. So we might be going to Disney, but we'll be taking cold showers. I do agree that the budgeting process does need to be reviewed to ensure that money is being spent in alignment with the strategic plan at every level.*

### **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?

*Based on my observations, I believe the School Board needs to strive to adhere to the processes in place to ensure transparency. Additionally, decisions regarding the budget require time to review, to seek community input, and for discussion before being voted on. Budget decisions have to be made in alignment with the county's strategic plan to ensure achievement of our goals.*

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?

*No, I believe the School Board has a responsibility to ensure that the school division and their staff are aligning the budget with the strategic plan and the system's goals, which are adopted by the School Board. However, I do think that lately, some decisions made by the School Board have overstepped the boundaries of their oversight. I have also observed some changes to the budget being made in the eleventh hour with no time provided for each member of the Board to consider all options and make an informed decision.*

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

*We should rethink paying for optional exams such as Advanced Placement. We could also potentially find savings if we revise the guidelines driving site-based management and establish a more rigorous system of oversight and training for our site-based administrators. Additionally, we could save money in the long run by establishing county-based programs, such as a common assessment database, rather than having each school spend money to utilize programs developed by outside sources.*

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?

*Budgetary priorities should include compensation for teachers and staff, overcrowding in the schools, and leveling the educational opportunities and resources provided to our students throughout the county.*

What are your thoughts on the citizen budget advisory committees?

*I believe that we should provide every possible opportunity for citizens to get involved and share their opinions with regards to budget. This is a key component of the responsible stewardship the School Board is tasked with. The question is how often do the ideas and recommendations made by advisory committees drive the decisions of the School Board?*

## **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 think the Strategic Plan needs to be tighter and more easily understood by all stakeholders. The Strategic Plan needs to be written in a manner that ensure it is the driving force in all decision making. Goals need to be specific and must address the priorities of the system and achievement of our students. The current Strategic Plan doesn't lend itself well to being a living document, referred to each time a decision is made.*

### **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 should be to work with the School Board to commit to increasing compensation for teachers and staff, to develop a long-range plan to alleviate overcrowding in our schools, to establish a plan for the distribution of resources among our schools that is reflective of the needs of each school, and to modify the processes by which funds are budgeted and spent, to include our current site-based management and profit sharing systems.*