

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 on 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 will not be published.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**

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### **Who are you?**

Please introduce yourself and explain why you're running.

**I'm not only a parent but also a product of PWCS: all 13 years. Counting my siblings, my children, my mother who worked as a librarian for PWCS and myself, my family, collectively, has 70 school years and counting in PWCS.**

**I love this community and want to give back to the school system that has given so much to my family and me.**

#### **Bio:**

- **Graduated Potomac High School 1993**
- **Attended VA Tech on an Army ROTC Scholarship and graduated in 1997**
- **U.S. Army Officer 1997-2002**
- **Defense Contractor/IT Project Manager 2002-2012; Certified Project Management Professional 2009**
- **Master's in Public Administration 2012**
- **Self-employed accountant 2013-present**
- **Chairman, Prince William County Safe Schools Advisory Council (SSAC) 2014-present**
- **Boy Scouts of America Occoquan District Finance Chair 2014-present**
- **Sunday School teacher, Grace Baptist Church**

### **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 made a career transition in 2012 from IT project management to being a self-employed as an accountant, which afforded me the opportunity to be more involved in the community.**

**I have attended several PTO/PTSA meetings at schools (other than my children's schools) to promote the SSAC Social Media Information night. I've visited schools to drop off school supplies, volunteer and get tours from the principals.**

**I have attended and spoken at several School Board meetings starting well before I decided to run for School Board Chair. I have also attended open**

work sessions and the School Board's budget presentation to the Board of County Supervisors.

While not yet an elected official, I have already begun to receive constituent issues. Parents contact me with concerns. The first and most important part is to listen. I usually direct the parent to their respective Associate Superintendent and School Board Representative. I then follow up with the parent.

We have started an informal advisory council open to anyone who works in public education (bus drivers, coaches, substitute teachers, teachers, etc.) to meet twice per month and provide input to me, as a candidate, on the ground level issues our staff are confronting on a daily basis.

Once elected, I will continue to build relationships with the school staff and hold open office hours inside the schools on a rotating basis. My goal is to make myself, as Chairman, accessible to the people educating our 87,000 kids every day.

With respect to job performance, I think Chairman of the School Board may be the most challenging job in Prince William County government. As Chairman of the Safe Schools Advisory Council, I have had the opportunity to run public meetings, in the Kelly Leadership Center, with parents and staff.

Bottom line: I have already demonstrated my time to commit for this position. Serving as the Chief Advocate for Public Education will be my primary responsibility starting next year.

### **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?

**"Researchers have found that gains in achievement generally occur when class size is reduced to less than 20 students." (GreatSchools.org) I would lower all average class sizes to a maximum of 20 students per class room. This improves the morale of our teachers because they spend more time teaching and less time managing behavior; this improves retention and lowers high school dropout rates; our kids receive a higher quality education; this statistic will drive job creators to come to Prince William County and help us diversify our tax base!**

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 implement all five phases of my class size reduction program for our middle school kids. "How to Fix Crowding: Start With Middle School" (Singstock, Potomac Local, 7/26/2015).**

**Our middle school kids and teachers are facing the highest average class sizes (31.5) in all of PWCS and PWCS has the largest average class sizes of all jurisdictions in the Washington Area Boards of Education (WABE, 2015).**

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

**The first answer is “carry forward”. We need more targeted budgeting so we carry forward a smaller amount of funding every year.**

**Furthermore, every dollar counts, and we need to focus our resources on the class room to reduce class sizes and provide more competitive teacher pay.**

**We start with the Central Office and ultimately review every program in PWCS, to include the programs mandated by Virginia’s Standards of Quality (SOQs). Programs that are unnecessary or ineffective should be eliminated with the savings reinvested into class size reduction.**

**We need to change our approach to the CIP. We must understand that the CIP and operating budget are separate. We can’t take CIP money and use it for teacher salaries. However, spending on new construction impacts the operating budget. Historically low interest rates have made borrowing cheap. We borrow to build schools the same way one borrows to buy a new car. If we borrow extra money to pay for school beauty then we have more debt to service in the out years. This impedes our ability to reduce class sizes and offer competitive teacher pay. As your next Chairman, I will look to school models like Battlefield, Freedom, Hylton and Forest Park.**

### **Class Sizes**

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

**Too high! PWCS has the largest average class sizes in all of the Washington Area Boards of Education (WABE, 2015).**

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?

**As an Army officer I learned that the best way to tackle large problems is to break them down into smaller more manageable problems. Our middle school kids and teachers are facing the highest average class sizes in PWCS (31.5). So we need to start there.**

**The cost to reduce class sizes in a single grade level across all Prince William County schools by one child per class is \$1.4 million a year. The cost to reduce all middle school class sizes by one child is \$4.2 million a year. The cost to reduce average middle school class sizes by five children per class is \$21 million per year.**

**The School Board should be able to find \$21 million in a \$1 billion annual operating budget; that equates to 2.1% of the budget. As your next Chairman, I will lead a transparent dialogue with the community about our priorities.**

**Average high school class sizes are 30.1 (WABE, 2015). However, much of the crowding that exists is not a capacity issue. Patriot is over capacity while Brentsville is under capacity. We need to look at alternative solutions**

for high school overcrowding such as dual enrollment with NVCC (classes are now tuition free) and Virginia Virtual High School.

**Right now, the cost of a single class through Virginia VHS is prohibitive. I will work with the legislature to make this option more accessible to PWCS families.**

### **Planning / CIP**

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

**No, we have been behind the power curve for at least a decade. However, I am also concerned about our county's debt. We enjoy a AAA credit rating. If our debt servicing exceeds 10% of our operating revenue, we lose our AAA credit rating which makes debt servicing costs climb.**

**Furthermore, interests rates are approximately 1/3 the historic average. If interest rates normalize we will face an extraordinary challenge with both our CIP and operating budgets. It's very important that we build new capacity, but do so with a focus on function over form.**

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

**The School Board needs a functional relationship with the BOCS. Having met with several sitting supervisors, I will continue to build the relationships necessary for both boards to collaborate while governing Prince William County. Only when we can grow our student capacity faster than our residential growth will we ultimately begin to address the crowding challenge.**

**To me, this means bringing more job creators to Prince William County. Prince William County's tax base is currently 85% residential. Bringing more job creators and commercial development to Prince William County will diversify our tax base, providing more tax dollars for vital public services - including education - without adding new students to our school system.**

### **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 it is inadequate.**

**Each voter will make 12 decisions on Election Day. I encourage all voters to learn about the candidates on their ballot and make an informed vote on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Continue to stay engaged and hold your elected officials accountable after the elections are over and we begin the task of governing.**

**I will make myself available to the community through “open door” office hours at rotating schools around the county. I will also hold town hall meetings like the ones Supervisor Jeanine Lawson and School Board Representative Gil Trenum have been holding in the Brentsville District.**

**It’s the job of the School Board to hold the administration accountable; likewise the School Board is accountable to the families/teachers of Prince William County. I will work hard to maintain accountability and transparency; it is also the responsibility of our citizens to hold our elected officials accountable and participate in the process of making public policy.**

### **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 don’t believe we can make a resource decision until we know whether the entire SPED department is being run efficiently.**

**Of all the SPED parents and teachers I’ve spoken with over the last 10 months, exactly one person has told me she was happy with the SPED services her grandchild was receiving through PWCS.**

**I don’t believe this is due to a lack of commitment from our SPED teachers. I think the entire SPED department – starting at Independent Hill – needs to be reviewed for responsiveness to our SPED community (parents, kids, teachers) and effectiveness in delivering the service our kids and teachers need.**

### **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 them 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 don’t believe the challenges in the transportation department are limited to New Directions. The School Board should implement a comprehensive review to look at more efficient solutions for safely delivering our kids to school – including our specialty programs.**

**Furthermore, we need to look at the staffing and turnover rates for our bus drivers. We need to review communication protocols while kids are in transit. Our school bus drivers have very important jobs. Let’s keep them safe and keep our kids safe.**

**As a Transportation officer in the U.S. Army it was my job to solve logistical problems on a daily basis. We moved entire brigades (thousands of troops and pieces of equipment between continents). PWCS should be able to efficiently and safely transport all kids in need of a bus ride to and from school.**

### **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?

**Prince William County Schools has the lowest average teacher pay in all of the Washington Area Boards of Education (WABE, 2015). The pay scale is very lop-sided; teachers who have made a decades-long commitment to PWCS (to whom I am very grateful) are some of the most highly compensated teachers in WABE.**

**While we cannot match the pay offered by Fairfax or Arlington (due to the differing nature of our tax bases and cost of living) we do need to get more competitive pay to our teachers and foster a work environment that treats teachers as professionals *and* incentivizes people to make a commitment to having their career in Prince William County. Retention is key.**

**I'm a proponent of "Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers". We have great staff in our schools today who are a product of PWCS. My siblings and I had the same teachers at Potomac High School. My kids had the same teachers at Montclair Elementary School. We need teachers to commit to PWCS in order to create this community school effect for other PWC families as well.**

### **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?

**We need to give more control to the schools and the teachers. Principal Hamish Brewer at Occoquan ES notes that his staff focus on teaching content and "the SOLs take care of themselves." His school enjoys high pass rates. Empower the teachers and principals, and they will deliver results for the families and kids in PWCS.**

**"Further centralizing education policy in Washington, D.C. is a counter-productive policy for Prince William County Public Schools. No Child Left Behind, Common Core and Race to the Top may be well-intentioned federal education policies but they produce unintended consequences. Accountability, funding and good governance necessitate Prince William County to push back against this latest federal intrusion into our local education policy making." (Singstock, Potomac Local, 3/15/2015).**

### **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 the move towards zero-based budgeting. It is imperative that every program and every department be reviewed by the School Board to determine whether the program is: (1) meeting a critical community need; (2) cost effective.**

**We continue the programs that are necessary and effective; we shut down the programs that are unnecessary or ineffective and redirect those resources to class size reduction. Zero-based budgeting helps us accomplish this policy goal.**

**The first department I want to examine is SPED. Based on the discontent I hear from parents and my conviction that SPED teachers and assistants are giving 100%, we need to look at the operation of this department from the top down.**

**The second department I want to examine is Transportation. We can solve logistical challenges noted earlier with respect to New Directions and the specialty programs. My focus on school safety extends beyond the boundaries of the school day and school property to kids in transit every morning and afternoon.**

### **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?

**The budget should be driven by the strategic plan. The strategic plan should be driven by the community's priorities. We will learn the community's priorities on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. A vote for me is a vote for class size reduction, competitive teacher pay and safe schools.**

**With respect to process, I will work with my colleagues on the School Board and BOCS to host town halls and encourage citizens to be part of that process.**

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?

**As your chairman, and an accountant, I will not only investigate where the money is going, but where the money is coming from. It's important to understand both sides of the budgetary ledger. We owe this due diligence to the residents of Prince William County and the Commonwealth of Virginia who, together, provide approximately 97% of our school system's operating revenue.**

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



**We can find savings in the CIP, in the discretionary portion of the operating budget and the mandatory spending portion of the operating budget. When we're focused on class size reduction and competitive teacher pay, every dollar counts!**

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, the beginning of class size reduction, for our middle school kids and teachers, requires \$21 million. We find this money in the \$1 billion operating budget by having a meaningful and transparent dialogue with the community about priorities. Voters may not agree with every vote I cast, but they will accept the result if they feel they've had an opportunity to participate in the process.**

What are your thoughts on the citizen budget advisory committees?

**I will create one and staff it with educators, business owners, parents and tax payers. Their task will be to help me watch the money that comes in and goes out while looking for the savings needed to implement my class size reduction program.**

### **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?

**The Strategic Plan should reflect the community's priorities. Some items contain lofty goals but lack specific targets. For example, 1.1.8 "The percentage of graduates receiving dual enrollment credit in one or more classes will increase." We should establish a hard target for dual enrollment.**

**Other items are admirable and measurable but how do we ensure attainment of these goals. For example, 4.4.2 "Teacher turnover rate will not exceed 12%." This is below the national turnover average of 15.5% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015).**

**Simply using percentages or movement (increase/decrease) can dilute the value of data collection and decision making. Specifically, I would like to add concrete targets for average classroom sizes.**

**Finally, the Strategic Plan is not mandatory spending. While it's beneficial to have long term goals, associating a program to the strategic plan doesn't mean the funding for that program is mandatory and not in need of review by the School Board. Any savings we find in the budget goes into class size reduction.**

### **The Superintendent**

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

- 1. Direct resources into class size reduction.**
- 2. Build functional and affordable schools to meet the needs of a growing community.**
- 3. Create a work atmosphere that encourages people to commit to making their career in Prince William County Schools.**

**Thank you for taking the time to read my responses and for your consideration. Let's remember that we have a great school system here in Prince William County with dedicate employees, a myriad of innovative robotics teams and dynamic specialty programs.**

**I genuinely believe that all three candidates care about our school system and want the best for Prince William County. The people of Prince William County don't care about partisan differences; they want a School Board that will deliver results.**

**Ask yourself "what sets these candidates apart?" Consider my record: product of PWCS; former Army officer; former IT project manager; certified Project Management Professional; Master's in Public Administration; Occoquan District Finance Chair Boy Scouts; Chairman of the Safe Schools Advisory Council.**

**No other candidate has a higher degree of investment in PWCS. I know this school system and have the best understanding of how to leverage local government and the business community to improve Prince William County Schools.**

**If you review my record you'll see that I am the candidate who will deliver results for the people of Prince William County and our 87,000 kids.**

**###**