

Questions for Candidates for the Prince William County School Board

Tracy Conroy for PWC School Board Chair

Who are you?

I am a registered nurse, small business owner, investor, wife, parent and educational advocate. Prince William County must have elected officials that are focused on education and not political or personal ambitions. Running for School Board Chair is not a stepping stone to higher office for me. This is where I wish to serve my community. I want optimal opportunities for the success of every student. Working in collaboration with fellow board members, elected officials, educators at every level and in partnerships with our community investors and parents we will thrive. Our needs are numerous but not insurmountable, together will set a course for the future.

Commitment to the job

Servicing as the School Board Chairperson-at-Large will require intense commitment and service. This is exactly what I have done for the last four years. I have worked alongside school board representatives, board of county supervisors, Kelly Leadership personnel, teachers, bus drivers, specialist and parents. Together we have identified shortcomings and successes and searched for solutions. Understanding the complex issues has been time intensive. It became a labor of love and true passion for me. I have served on school budget committees for 3 years and invested endless hours learning about our school division. Simply navigating our division's website took determination. Searching for data and encouraging transparency has been both frustrating and rewarding. We have seen progress and I will continue to advocate for free flow of all non-closed session information.

I have attended or watched every school board meeting since 2011. In the last 4 budget cycles I have missed only one CIP/budget work session due to illness. Prince William County School Board work sessions occur after regular meeting and often starting at 10 or 11 pm and end shortly before 2am. Since they were not televised they are always high priority for me. In the last four years Mr. Singstock has attended one work session while Mr. Sawyers has attended none. I am the only candidate that has shown the type of commitment our division requires.

My involvement does not stop there. I strongly advocate for all students and have been the voice for both parents and educators. Equity is a concern for our diverse population and meeting the essential for all is critical to our future. As a former moderator for an educational site my goal has always been to educate others and to encourage involvement in education. Through opened minded and respectful debate I expand my knowledge and understanding of complex issues. I did not anticipate this would one day lead me to the campaign trail but this is now a calling for me. I

want to work for a better tomorrow through educating our students today. I am running as an Independent and did not seek endorsement from either the Republican or Democratic Parties. I am qualified, committed and ready to serve at the will of the people, not a political.

Top Priorities

Question:

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

Answer:

If I could wave a magic wand I would immediately restore all special education, economically disadvantaged and ESOL funding to levels consistent with those of fiscal year 2007. I would then increase the funding to match the rate of inflation and population growth.

Next I would restore all steps to level each educator anticipated they would be at when they signed their employment contracts. I would reinstate teacher assistants and offer T.A.s and ancillary staff permanent, benefitted positions. I would provide livable wages of all ancillary staff and competitive salaries for all specialists. Our division is the largest employer in Prince William County; my goal is for PWCS to be the best workplace with the highest levels of satisfaction in the Northern Virginia region.

Question:

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?

Answer:

I would not make this decision in isolation. In a nearly 1.4 billion dollar annual budget \$20 million dollars is not enough to solve all the funding deficits. Applying those funds to class size reduction is the easy answer but knowing where the money will have the greatest impact takes determination, time and teamwork. Spending on class size reduction must be targeted and individualized to the regional needs. Reduction plans should be well vetted and effective. True priorities require planning, objectives, goals and continuous, ongoing evaluation. I will go to the experts in the field, our teachers, and together we will determine the best use of these funds. We will develop 5 and 10 year plans; not last minutes, last funded additions.

Question:

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

First on the block would be purchasing of awards. Hanging a plank on the wall is the same as investing in award winning students. I would then look towards all the “small dollar” items our school board budget advisory committees identified. Things like the e-backpack initiative, long term, unfilled central office positions, reimbursement of licensing fees for top level administration, central warehouse cost and school division vehicles for staff located at only one site. All of these “small dollars” add up to significant saving but they will not be enough.

I will then turn my focus to the Capital Improvement Plan and the office Facilities Management. I will gain an increased understanding the procurement process and the ratings we are using when awarding vendors. Prince William County Schools is building the most expensive school in the state of Virginia. Attractive buildings are assets but their cost must be carefully monitored. Most of our new construction costs are covered through VPSA bonds. A responsible School Board acknowledges debt, is mindful of the county’s AAA rating and the corresponding debt ceiling. PWCS will continue to grow and your elected School Board must be an excellent steward of limited funds and superb managers of debt.

A clear distinction between needs and wants is essential to honest discussion with the taxpayers. A prioritized list of critical unmet needs will yield a budget that is both supported by all stakeholders and fully fundable. As your School Board Chair I will insist that all needs are identified and met before a want is funded. I will then go to bat for those wants because we all desire the best for our children. I will work with community partners, the Board of County Supervisors and State Representatives to give our students the greater opportunities for success.

Class Sizes

Question:

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

Answer:

This is a very easy one. Our class sizes are the largest in the state. We are losing talented educators and failing our children. Four more years of this will not be acceptable.

Question:

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?

My opponent, Mr. Singstock, wrote an op-ed stating class size reduction should start in middle school. Mr. Sawyers may also have a plan in mind. This weekend I spoke with two 8th grade math teachers at two different PWC Middle Schools, one had 35 students while the other had 27 students. It is easy to see that a one-size fits all plan will not work. Site based managers make decisions with their limited funds based off their individual school's most dire needs. A true plan is developed with the experts in the field, our teachers, and the input of site based managers. A Chairperson does not develop solutions in isolation, nor does an administrative office. It is reckless to endorse a plan without a thorough vetting. I am not impressed by the reductions made in the last two years and I am yet to meet a teacher that is. Our class sizes did not reach these levels over night and they will not become "acceptable" without a committed team working together. I will empower that team to lead the way. They will be my guide.

Planning / CIP

Question:

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

Answer:

This answer may shock people but my answer is yes or at least PWCS used to adequately plan for growth. The approved FY 2006 to 2015 CIP looked ahead, determined the needs and made appropriate plans. In this CIP Patriot High School would have opened in 2009 at an estimated cost of \$58,400,000, Colgan High School would have opened in 2012 at an estimated cost of \$65,670,000 and the 13th High School would have opened in 2014 at an estimated cost of \$71,020,000. With time the CIP was altered and the plan to aggressively address growth was discarded. Patriot High School eventually opened 2 years behind schedule at an estimated cost of \$84,110,000. Colgan High School will open 4 years behind schedule in 2016 at an estimated cost of \$109,007,000. With any luck the 13th High School will open 6 years behind schedule with at an estimated cost of over \$115 million dollars IF land is finally acquired.

Plans without action and financial restrains are useless. The School Board and Administration was aware of the rapidly growing population in 2005, they approved a plan to address it. The plan was not followed. Prince William County Schools is behind schedule and over budget. It is time for a change; our division cannot take 4 more years of this type of leadership.

Question:

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

Answer:

Although I answered yes above I want to add that overall projections across the county are within an acceptable margin for error but individual school projections have been not been. I expect these projections to be improved.

Transparency

Question:

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?

Answer:

The process to inform and solicit community input has been inadequate. I will be advocating for involvement, eliminating the dismissive attitude so many folks have felt and reaching out to all stakeholders. I will hold town hall meeting, encouraging citizen and educator committees and always have an open mind when it comes to finding solutions. Our students will come first and we will operate as a team for the betterment of all.

Special Education

Question:

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?

Answer:

Significantly fewer funds are dedicated to Special Education today than were in 2007. This is disturbing considering the rate of inflation, student growth and increased complexities in special education. Our students are underserved and our specialists are over tasked. It is not a matter of where to look for funding for special education because, as I stated earlier, I will not fund wants over needs. As your Chairperson I will not approve a budget that does not fully fund the needs of special education students. Caseloads will come into compliance and all needed assistance will be provided in a budget that contains my signature.

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?

Answer:

Meeting the needs of our most at-risk population is not an option, it is necessary to reach the goals of our society. Every student needs a pathway to success. We want productive, employable citizens that are self-supporting and able to give back. A ride is not too much to ask for when we are talking about the future adults. I absolutely will vote yes to transportation for New Directions students. We are blessed to have Principal Eichorn at the helm of New Directions, he and his staff are doing an amazing job. He has my full support and respect. I encourage everyone to learn about this school and its innovative approach to education.

Compensation

Question:

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?

Answer:

Our educators and ancillary staff are underpaid, they always will be. They are given the overwhelming responsibility. There is not enough money to ever fully compensate them for what they do for children every day. With commitment we can offer greater pay and attempt to reach the levels of our neighbors to the north. I would like to see us start with step corrections. Let's get our educators to the level they were promised when hired. I have identified spending in answers above but know it will take more cuts or funds to reach all goals. It will take time but I am committed to our staff and their needs.

Classroom Autonomy

Question:

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?

Answer:

Again I do not believe in one size fits all solutions. Teachers are professionals and must have the freedom to assess the needs of their students and to teach at the pace that works. It is time to let our teachers teach and stop micromanaging.

Zero Based Budgeting

Question:

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?

Answer:

I not only believe in it, I advocated for it. Facilities management/construction and special education are tops on my list. I believe savings will be found and along with valuable insight. I am satisfied with the results to date. Sometimes savings are not visible on paper but in future performance.

The Budget

Question:

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?

Answer:

YES! Let's start with the work sessions. They cannot occur at 10 or 11pm at night. Our staff and board must have ability to concentrate. This does not happen after a long day of work, dinner, a closed session meeting and a long open session. I have seen staff that must report back to work before 9am leave the building blurry eyed at 2am. I have seen board members too tired to go on and frustrated.

Several years ago, in what looked like an attempt to stop Board Members from working individually with citizen budget committees, the School Board voted to form a representative budget committee with each elected official nominating one citizen. For reasons unknown this did not come to fruition. I would like the board to revisit this.

The initial proposed budget is not available to the board or the public until presentation by the Superintendent in the February timeframe. Other counties present earlier, some as early as November. This is something our board and Superintendent may be able to work towards. While a 1.4 billion dollar annual budget should not be rushed it is important that the School Board, Committees and citizens have adequate time for examination before approval.

Question:

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?

Answer:

No, examining and approving the budget and CIP is one of the School Board's greatest responsibilities. Nickels and dimes add up. Rubber stamping a budget, any budget, is a disservice to the community that elected you to serve.

Question:

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

Answer:

Yes, I believe there are areas of savings. I have identified those in an earlier question.

Question:

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?

Answer:

There are areas. ESOL, SPED, Gifted Education come to mind as well as Career/Technical Education.

Question:

What are your thoughts on the citizen budget advisory committees?

Answer:

I participated on the School Board Citizen Budget Committees for three years. I also served on the Brentsville District County Budget Committee. The county's approach was more formal and cooperative. A citizen presentation was provided and the committee could ask staff questions directly. At the county level I felt a team approach and partnership among the elected officials, citizens and the finance staff. While the county staff treated the volunteers with respect it should be said the school staff was not as warmly welcoming. I want to see this changed. We must work together if we want to find solutions.

Strategic Plan

Question:

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?

Yes, the Strategic Plan is our guide. If it is not the direction we wish to travel than the Plan must be changed.

The Superintendent

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

Dr. Walts' goals and objectives are established in closed session by the elected School Board Representatives. They are confidential. When elected I will be able to view Dr. Walts' evaluation and make adjustments as deemed appropriate by the newly elected board as a whole.

Thank you for this opportunity Kim. I am appreciative of your commitment to education and service through PWC Education Reform. The time you and the other moderators have given has had a lasting impact. People are becoming involved and staying informed. Please continue to be vigilant.

Sincerely,
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