

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 Responses received after 9 pm on September 14th will not be published.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 Willie Deutsch. I have a background in government, and communications. I would like to use that background to be an advocate for teachers, parents, students, and taxpayers on the School Board.

PWCS has 87,000 students, and 57% of your property taxes are being used to fund the school system. Whether or not you have students in the school system, its success impacts our community. We need to make sure we have a transparent school board that engages citizens, and reflects the priorities of the county.

I helped fight to make sure Ferlazzo School remained a community school, and I've spent this year knocking on doors talking to thousands of residents. If I have the honor of being elected, I will continue to fight for you and listen to you.

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?

The job of a School Board member requires much more than simply attending two board meetings a month. It requires members to proactively engage and listen to citizens, and thoroughly research the issues coming before them.

This year, I've attended all but two school board meetings since January, multiple work sessions including one on the budget, a joint BOCS SB meeting, multiple public meetings on the Ferlazzo school situation, and BOCS and planning commission meetings on the issue.

I've also spent hours talking with parents, teachers, and community leaders on the phone, at doors, and in meetings listening to their concerns and researching the issues confronting the School Board.

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?

Let's create a dual enrollment system for all PWCS students with Northern Virginia Community College that strengthens the value of a high school diploma in Prince William County. College is too expensive for most students. If students were graduating from high school with certifications in their field, they could enter the work force working a good paying job right out of high school. For those who do want to go to college, a dual enrollment opportunity would allow them to graduate from a four year institution quicker and cheaper.

Let's make sure every student is offered the dignity of work through improving the value of a PWCS High School diploma.

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?

According to the January 2015 CIP presentation, PWCS is on track to hit its debt ceiling within the next eight years. Unlike the federal government, we can't simply raise the debt ceiling. Hitting our debt ceiling will endanger our bond rating making it even more expensive to build the needed schools that will alleviate overcrowding.

I would propose taking the first years \$20 million and using it to pay down the debt we are servicing in our CIP. From then on, I would use half of that money to build projects on our CIP.

The other \$10 million I would put towards one of the most overlooked part of our school system, our bus drivers. Currently, our bus drivers are significantly under paid and not receiving the benefits they should. As a result the school system is having a hard time retaining and hiring drivers. This leads to longer bus rides for our students. Let's pay our bus drivers what they deserve as we improve the system for all students.

Any remaining budget would be used to buy classroom resources. Teachers are paying an average of \$400 out of pocket for school supplies, with some paying as much as \$2,000. This shows incredible dedication from our teachers, but is a wrong community expectation. We should make sure teachers are provided the necessary resources and support to teach.

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

We need to seriously examine the central office budget. As much as possible, money needs to be used in the classroom to educate students. That staff had the money to print 100,000 copies of a glossy flyer lobbying the board of supervisors for more money while teachers don't have the money to print handouts should alarm everyone. We also need to look at carryover funds, and other discretionary funds.

We also need to look at building costs. Loudoun built high schools in 2009 and 2011 for about \$60 million each. Patriot High School cost PWC a little over \$70 million. While PWC builds larger high schools, if we had built Patriot at the same size as it is with Loudoun's price per square foot, we would have saved about \$3 million. Across multiple building projects, those savings add up fast.

As tight as money is in the budget, we can't afford to build the most expensive high schools in Virginia. We need to make sure we are building as efficiently as possible to address the overcrowding impacting our school system, and the educational and security problems associate with the overcrowding.

Class Sizes

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

One of the few things everyone can agree on is that class sizes are too large.

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?

Clearly overcrowding is an important community priority. Overcrowding is a function primarily of space. We need to focus on increasing classroom space in the county. There are at least three things we need to do.

- 1. The School Board needs to work with the Board of Supervisors to address this issue. We need to work together to find land for schools, and make sure our growth plan is in line with our infrastructure capabilities.*
- 2. Prioritize spending. If we believe that reducing class size is a priority, then we need to spend money accordingly. Instead of building a pool and the most expensive high school in the Commonwealth, we should be building classroom space. If we are going to spend millions on extravagant building projects, then lets not pretend we are focused on reducing class size. Ever dollar spent on construction that isn't alleviating overcrowding needs to be strongly questioned.*
- 3. We need to pay down the debt. Current School System CIP projections have us breaking our debt ceiling within the next eight years. This endangers our bond rating and will make it harder to borrow money for building projects in the future. We must start being conscious of our debt if we are going to be able to address overcrowding in the long term.*
- 4. While the School Board needs to work as hard as possible to address overcrowding, pressure needs to be put on the Board of Supervisors to make this a priority. The overcrowding was caused as the Board of Supervisors passed policies which significantly increased the population of the county without funding the needed infrastructure. The county needs the Board of Supervisors to stop approving residential development and fund needed infrastructure till school crowding and transportation are back under control.*

Planning / CIP

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

It may to the extent possible.

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

The challenges are in locating and funding schools to address the growth. We need increased coordination between the School Board and Board of County Supervisors to make sure land is located and funded for schools to alleviate the infrastructure stresses caused by the constant approval of residential development.

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?

It appears the PWCS "process used to inform and solicit input form the community" is more nonexistent than broken. In the Ferlazzo situation the school system decided to take away a community elementary school from the communities around Minnieville and Spriggs without talking to any citizens. A few citizens found the proposal tucked into a long list of CIP changes, and myself, Liz Brown, and Dan Brown spoke out against it at a School Board meeting.

Eventually the outcry became so loud that multiple public hearings were scheduled, the Board of Supervisors got involved, and eventually the plan was called off.

School Board members need to see themselves as people who represent the people, not as rubber stamps for the school administration.

This summer the PWCS approved the 2016-2020 strategic plan. A document that sets the systems priorities for four years should be created with aggressive citizen input. There are processes for a citizen driven strategic plan process, but sadly the school board has ignored them and passed a strategic plan with almost no citizen input.

Expecting the citizenry to track every action of the School Board and speak up if they have a problem with it does not count as soliciting community input. We need a school board that views itself as the representatives of the people and as such should be soliciting the views of the citizens impacted before making decisions.

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?

Of course special education isn't sufficiently funded, and that is a travesty. We should make sure that a disability doesn't preclude you from a quality education. The number one area of underfunding is simply hiring teachers. Case loads for special education instructors are unreasonably high.

During the last budget cycle, special education instructors came to the school board asking for funding for additional positions. Teachers told stories of working long hours on weekends to prepare material for their students, and the juggling acts they had to perform as they tried to support all the students they were assigned. A proposal was made to reduce funding for training for employees in the central office to fund additional special education positions. The proposal was rejected, and that was wrong. A School Board that values training staff over educating special needs students is not providing a World Class education. Over the summer, more special education instructors quit as they believed the school administration didn't support them. It's time to do right by our students and support some of the hardest working teachers in our community.

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?

New Directions has had incredible success helping the students that fall through the cracks. If students are unable to attend due to transportation issues, they will have a hard time receiving the help they need. If it is possible, transportation should be provided.

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?

We need to do everything possible to make sure teachers are adequately compensated. At present, teacher salaries in PWC are comparable to Loudoun and Fairfax while the cost of living is significantly lower in PWC.

While, we should continue to make sure our teachers are well compensated, a bigger part of the teacher retention problem is teacher morale. Teachers are micromanaged

by central office, feel unsupported, under resourced, and are punished if they speak up. One teacher told me that at her school, the teachers were lectured by staff and told why morale should be better. Central office staff needs to see how they can change to improve the ways they support our teachers so our teachers can thrive and do what they know is best for our students.

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 hire teachers to teach, not to be robots. Teachers have spent years of their life learning how to teach, and learning the material they are teaching. Let's support the teachers and stop micromanaging our teachers.

I would like to see an assessment of all mandates placed on teachers, and see which ones need to be removed to make sure teachers have the time to teach instead of meet bureaucratic requirements.

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?

It's time for the school system to get zero based budgeting. Every department should have to implement it within the next two years.

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?

A line by line draft version of the budget needs to be released at the beginning of the process in excel documents so that the public can analyze the proposal and can offer constructive input. Also every part of the budget needs to be matched with the strategic plan to show how the budget is funding the established goals of the Board.

Work sessions on the budget need to be held during the day on weekends so that the public can be involved instead of after 10:00pm at night when everyone is exhausted.

The original budget needs to be viewed as a draft, not the final product. Staff should see their job as helping the Board and community make sure the budget reflects the community's goals instead of aggressively defending every line item.

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. If that is all the School Board is going to do, then the board shouldn't exist. The School Board needs to analyze every aspect of the budget to make sure it reflects the communities priorities.

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

Every area needs to be looked at for savings. An incredible amount of energy was expended to make sure sunlight wasn't brought into the last budget process. It's time every part of the budget is looked at building costs, central office budgets, and padding in multiple funds.

We saw how last year's "budget crisis" was solved when staff "realized" that one fund was padded. Imagine what would happen, if we examined every program.

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?

We've talked about them already, but two of the most underfunded areas of the budget are special needs education, and compensation for bus drivers.

What are your thoughts on the citizen budget advisory committees?

Every board member should have them. They are critical ways for the community to be involved and help shine additional scrutiny on the budget 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?

The PWCS Strategic Plan isn't bad. I wish there had been significantly more citizen involvement in its creation to make sure it reflected the desires of the community. I also don't think it is right that the current school board creates a four year strategic plan that in effect binds the hands of the board that will replace them.

The Superintendent

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

1. *Make sure Independent Hill is doing everything possible to support teachers and empower them.*
2. *Increase priority based budgeting to make sure we are doing everything possible to compensate teachers, deal with overcrowding, and fund special needs education.*
3. *Let's create a comprehensive plan to increase CTE and dual enrollment education opportunities for students.*