



2013 Albemarle School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Pam Moynihan (Rio)

On November 5, 2013, voters in Albemarle County go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on the Albemarle County School Board. This recording is Brian Wheeler's September 19, 2013 interview with Pam Moynihan. The candidates seeking election in other districts include Eric Strucko (Samuel Miller) and Kate Acuff (Jack Jouett).

The audio of this interview and complete election coverage is available on the Charlottesville Tomorrow website:

http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/county_elections/

INTERVIEW

Ms. Moynihan, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio and written transcript for this interview will be available online.

Information from this interview will be used in the compilation of the non-partisan voter guide being co-produced by Charlottesville Tomorrow, C-VILLE Weekly, and the League of Women Voters. Charlottesville Tomorrow does not endorse any candidates and our goal is to provide information to the public so they can make an informed vote on issues primarily related to land use, transportation, public education, and community design.

As you are aware, some of the questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, others have not. All County School Board candidates will be asked the same questions. We ask that you keep these questions confidential until all candidates have been interviewed.

Each candidate will be provided an opportunity to review the excerpts selected for the voter guide before its publication. Are you ready to start?

1. Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on the Albemarle County School Board.

My past experience that qualifies me to be on the Albemarle County School Board is a history of incumbency going back to 2001. This is my 12th year on the School Board, and I'm ending my 3rd term. I've had children in the schools. My children are both grown, but they were graduates of Albemarle High School, so I'm very familiar with the County schools and the County School Board. I've lived in Albemarle County since 1995. While that's not a 195-year resident, I feel that I've lived here to see a lot of the growth that has occurred, and a lot of the changes that have occurred in Albemarle County since the late 90s.

I've lived through some very good budget times, and I've lived through some very bad budget times, so I feel I have a very good perspective as to how the budget has been going, and to what we've done in the County schools, whether it be through good times or bad times. And I think I can look at both of those times and learn from them and bring that experience and knowledge, as I have been doing, to the County School Board.

2. What is your top priority for action by the School Board during the next 4 years?

There's a lot of different things that we can be doing over the next four years. Some of the things that I first ran for the School Board for were, for instance, excellence in arts, music, and theater education. I think we've come a long way with that, and I think that all of our schools have improved their arts, music, and theater programs. And it's still a priority, and I intend as long as I'm on the School Board to continue to make the arts, music, theater, and drama a priority. It needs to be a priority because children need culture in order to be able to survive in this world. I think it makes people and children in general better when they have some access to culture—number one. Number two, I think it's important from a literacy standpoint, because those students who are literate in the arts are also often very literate in mathematics, and also in reading and English. So for me, the arts are always going to be a priority. No matter what, that's going to be a number one priority.

But also I think we need to make sure that the instruction in our schools, while not having to be improved per se, I think we need to continue to find ways to [differentiate] instruction to the individual student. Nowadays students are very focused on learning with technology, but at the same time I think it's very important that we ensure that our teaching staff continue to know and monitor the strengths and weaknesses of every student, because only then can we make the lowest performers achieve. And we need to have individualized education as much as we possibly can. It's not always possible, but it's one of

my goals, to try to make it so that we can sort of individualize the education to the students.

And another priority is even though we have bad budget times, it's still a concern for me to make sure that we're doing things with fiscal accountability in mind. That's always one of those things that's kind of been near and dear to my heart, both in good times and in bad times. I think we've been doing very well over the last couple of years. The last four years I've been on the School Board we've had a terrible budget situation with the economic downturn, and I think we're doing well. But I want to continue to see us maintain an attitude of "Yes, we need to meet the students' needs, but at the same time we need to make sure we do this wisely and smartly." Because it's not always wise to throw money at an issue. Sometimes you have to step back and go "What is the best way to go about this issue?" Maybe sometimes it's better efficiencies in educational delivery, or what we're doing with contracting, or what we're doing with procurement. Whatever it is that we're doing, we just need to step back for a minute and make sure that we're doing it smartly. So that would be something that would be a priority for me.

Also, I would like to, I think I mentioned it with the arts and music and theater, but I do want to continue to see what we're doing with the magnet and the STEM schools. While I think that music, art, and theater are important, I think it's important that we develop good mathematicians, engineers, and scientists. We really need that, and we especially need that with the young women that we have going through school nowadays.

Also, I would like to continue, and I know that this is a lot, but I've been on the Board a long time, so there's a lot of little things that interest me. And the other thing, of course, to continue along with our technology development. And we've really gotten into the 1 on 1 computer initiative, and we've got a whole schedule for that. And I think we need to continue along that vein, because we have found that the students of this generation are almost born holding an iPad or some computer that's technological. And that's a way that they learn, so if that's a way that they learn and more of the world is open to them like that, then we need to ensure that we get more computers out to the students, but that we do it smartly. And I'm sure that our school division will do that.

3. Is your school division recruiting the best teachers and measuring their performance effectively? How do you know?

I think our school division is recruiting the best teachers. While I'm a good school board member and I don't get down into the nitty gritty basics of who hires who, I think from what I've seen from the success of our graduates, that our school division is hiring the best teachers. And if they aren't hiring the best teachers, I think that they're identified in a timely manner and not asked

to return. From what I've seen of the teachers in our schools, I'm very impressed with their caliber.

That being said, are we measuring their performance effectively? I'm not so sure. A number of years ago, they came up with a new teacher performance evaluation, and it basically encompasses going around a classroom and taking a brief snapshot, if you will, of the teachers and what they're doing in the classroom. They're looking to see if the students are engaged, and they basically take a little computer type rendering, and it's like a 3-minute walk-through. I'm not so sure that a 3-minute walk-through, and I've never been sure about this, I've always been sort of on the fence about it, if doing a 3-minute walk-through is really an effective way to tell if a teacher is doing an effective job. I've been on these walk-throughs, I've been around, I've seen it and my understanding is that maybe a teacher will get one or two a year. I'm not so sure that that's the best way to measure an individual teacher.

It's easy for them to say, "Oh we can figure it out, we're educators, we're administrators, and we can figure it out." But maybe the teacher is having a bad day, maybe they came in at the wrong time of class, maybe the students are having a bad day. To judge the effectiveness of a teacher based on 1 or 2 limited walk-throughs is not, in my opinion, always the best way to do it. And I'm not always so sure that it's all that particularly fair to the teachers. They say it's worked, but I'm not so sure. In fact, my understanding is that they are going through this phase now where they are looking at this new way to evaluate teachers, and so I'm looking forward to seeing what they come up with.

Secondly, I think we might be able to measure performance better, or see if we could have better performance by evaluating an awards program of some type. And I'm certainly in no way saying that we need to have pay for performance. I don't want anyone to think that I'm saying that, because I'm sure that that would be unpopular. I'm pretty sure anyway. Not that anybody's told me, though it seems to be that what I'm looking for would be some sort of award that's more than just a "We Notice." It's nice to be noticed by the kids, and those teachers who do get noticed by the children with an award from student council or something, that is something that if I were a teacher, I would be really flattered because it means that the students really like me.

But I think that some sort of performance award or for some of the best teachers that they could compete. Not just have their principal say "You should have it," but compete for these awards amongst others in the school division. You know maybe not just in their school, but in the division at-large. You now have special awards for things like best practices, good collaboration, or something novel. And I'm not saying that we don't do this now. We have commendations and we see this every now and again, but something maybe that would be coming up from their peers or something like

that that we could hold up and put pictures or something in the County Office Building, something along those lines.

Let's see, measuring performance, I had something else in my head and I can't think of it right this minute. Can I come back to this if I remember it? It just escaped me.

4. Why do we have persistent achievement gaps? What's the single most important thing you will do to close the gap?

We have persistent achievement gaps because many of the groups that are monitored for these gaps are some of the neediest students that we have out there. I don't believe that the schools can do everything. The schools can help and do what we can, but unfortunately some of these students come to school with hardships. They may not necessarily be up to speed with their peers. Some of these students come to school not necessarily ready for kindergarten, or not ready for first grade, so they're starting from a lower level of, not potential, but just capability because they have not perhaps had the same opportunities as some of their peers have had. And once they get to school, they're not starting at the same level. So once they get into school and they get into the grades, or even if they're students who have a foreign language and they come into our schools at grade 9 and they've never spoken English before. So they're at a disadvantage because they're in 9th grade but aren't literate necessarily in their own language. So they have these hardships and handicaps that limit their abilities just from the get go, just the baseline. So essentially for some of these students every year they go up a grade and every year we have new kids coming in, and so you've got to measure these achievement gaps within their own cohort, and I think sometimes that the State doesn't necessarily look at it that way because we're going to have students coming in every year, maybe different students, or new students, or students starting at kindergarten or 1st grade that are going to come in with gaps.

Now these gaps persist, but the problem is that when the students come into the classroom, the teachers, again, have a whole class full of students. Maybe 20, maybe 25, it depends upon where we've diversified our budgeting to the classroom based on free and reduced lunch. We do have that. So some of our classes in some of our elementary schools are smaller than others, but the fact remains that one teacher or one teaching assistant in a class has to teach to that whole class. So it goes back to this idea of how do we [differentiate], how do we allow every teacher to know every student, to know their weaknesses, and to be able to teach to that student. Teachers should know where the weaknesses are, even in a class of 20. Unfortunately they have to teach a class of 20, and we have persistent gaps because perhaps maybe the students who are in these groups are not getting a higher degree of attention than they might need to close those gaps.

And if we could find a way perhaps to give those students more attention, and it might mean hiring more teachers, or making classes smaller, or hiring more teaching assistants or more specialists. And I know we've done this. We've tried to do these things for years, but now with technology, I think we're better able to pinpoint where the students weaknesses are, and actually teach to those weaknesses. I'm thinking that the more we can teach to those weaknesses while they're in school and bring them up to the same or even higher than those kids that did not have the better background when they came into school. I'm not sure if I'm saying that right, but the point I'm making is, if we can find those students' weaknesses, and pinpoint them directly, and teach to those weaknesses, and find a way to do that, whether that be through technology, or it be just through individualized progress programs, then that might be a way to reduce those achievement gaps.

5. Describe a part of the school division that would benefit from increased city and county cooperation that you would make a priority.

I've always made this a priority. In the last 12 years since I've been on the Board, my priority for City-County cooperation has been in things like procurement and contracting and supplies, and finding ways for our school divisions to cooperate. And it would be easy, I think, to be able to do joint contracts, joint procurement for supplies. Maybe even getting joint contracts to do things like fix the facilities, do facilities management. Another thing, and I was just thinking about this recently, was perhaps our County buses go through the City all the time. They go through the City and Charlottesville buses go through the County. Why can't we look at perhaps maybe doing some joint bus routes where an Albemarle County bus can pick up a City child and City bus can pick up a County child? And perhaps we can find some efficiencies in things like buses and transportation.

We haven't done real good at saying educationally or instructionally, necessarily finding ways to combine programs. But I think that one of the things we really should do is look at ways to look at other things, the support structure, the infrastructure, the transportation. Things that we might be able to get a better deal from contractors on if we go in together, as opposed to separately. I've made that a priority, and unfortunately we do a lot of talk, the City and County. I can't begin to tell you how many meetings I have sat in where we come out and say "This is what we're going to do. We're going to do this." And it's almost always in the contracting department or something and we just don't see any movement. We do still have the Public Education Foundation, and we cooperate on that, which is good, but there's other things that we could cooperate on....

6. What's your view of the proliferation of high stakes standardized tests?

They've proliferated way too much. When I first came on the Board is when they first started the SOL tests, and we didn't like them then, and I don't think we like them now. I don't think there's anything we can do about it though, and that's the sad part. I think that people are so used to them now that it's almost something that people don't complain about anymore.

The Standardized tests, having them in all the grades we have them now, it puts the kids through a lot of stress that they don't need. It puts the teachers through a lot of stress that they don't need, because increasingly teachers are concerned that "If my classes don't do well on these tests, than something is going to backlash on me." So everyone is stressed out. Teachers, students, parents of the students before they have to go to school and take these tests. It costs a lot of time and effort for everybody involved. Fortunately they're electronic nowadays, so you don't have people carrying around boxes and having to have a separate office space to hold them all. That's a good thing, because it gives us more space back in the schools, so that's one good thing about having the tests be computer-delivered. But it doesn't stop the stress. It just causes stress everywhere, and I think teachers just really want to teach.

What I would like to see, and it's what we're trying to go to, is to try to create tests where the students can think analytically and creatively, and the teachers can create tests that aren't just multiple choice that students can really think about. There are tests out there that the school division I know is looking at to see if we can perhaps replace some of these rote standardized tests with something at the end of the year that can be a measure of the ability to analyze to think creatively. I think standardized tests do not test that. We need a different test that will do that. And we are creating things in the school division now that will look at a student's piece of work and test it and measure it differently than just by standardized tests. Because we certainly don't want to have curriculum that is pretty much the same across the state.

We don't want teachers to teach to the test, and that's what happens when you have high-stakes prioritized tests. And teachers get nervous that they aren't going to teach what's on the test. The students get nervous because they know that it's high stakes.

My view of the proliferation of it is that it's just too much. There's too many and people come into school to take a test and they may not feel good. It goes back to the same thing about how we're evaluating teachers. You have a bad day? Too bad so sad. You fail the test and you wind up having to take the test again. And that is not right. It's not a good test of how well students are doing. I'm not sure what it is, but my view of it is, I don't like them and I would love to see it replaced with something else.

7. What type of high school should the county plan on building next to address enrollment growth?

Lots of people would say that we should look at building another comprehensive high school. Comprehensive high schools are very expensive. When I first came on the board they were \$40 million, so you can imagine 12 years later what that means. I think that we can be creative. It's the same way I want to be creative with not having standardized tests. I think we can look out of the box and maybe be creative some other way. Maybe there's another type of high school that we can consider that may not necessarily need to have all of the fields and all of the various facilities. It could be some kind of totally magnet school where kids could go, or perhaps a complete STEM school, or just a school of business management. I'm thinking creatively here. There's a lot of different things that we can do with interests that students have. It goes back to creating magnet schools. You would create something that a lot of kids from the County might want to go to and you develop that, and you make it really specific to that specific interest. Maybe a complete STEM school, off the top of my head, some sort of advanced technologies, or a school of art and music, or maybe even philosophy.

I don't know, it's not necessarily something that I've thought out, but I don't think that we necessarily have to do something that is the everyday, run-of-the-mill high school. I think we can try to find what it is students are looking for today, and develop a school that is focused on that, and even perhaps make it more of an online type school. They've found that online delivery of education is extremely effective. I myself have a Master's degree that came from a very well-known, good online school. It's a brick and mortar school obviously, but it was a Master's degree and it was done online. And I am a big believer in that form of delivery. It is right for some people. It may not be right for everybody. And parents know their students, and students know what they can and cannot do. And there may be some students out there who would thrive in an online-type mixture hybrid school environment in which they can do some of their studies online, do some of their studies during the day, and perhaps participate in internships or some sort of work-study program that maybe they don't want to attend your everyday, typical, brick-and-mortar school from early in the morning until late in the afternoon. I think we should investigate and see what the students want, see what's out there and what we can provide. I think there's a lot of out-of-the-box thinking in which we don't need to buy one-hundred twenty-some odd acres for your typical, every day, run of the mill high school.

At the same time, we are going to have a problem with our high school enrollment here very shortly. We are going to have to consider what we're going to do about that. We've already decided that Albemarle High School can't be added on to, so we've got some other choices to make, and we need

to make this high school choice very shortly, because we are seeing enrollment increases, particularly in the northern part of the County.

8. Name one specific area of the school division's budget that you are concerned about and why. Do you think it deserves more funding or less?

The last couple of years I think we've been trying to hold the line on the entire budget, and we haven't had a whole lot of initiatives that we have been able to add. And this is largely because of the economic downturn and the budget situation. When I look at it, I'm concerned with instruction. And the reason I'm concerned with instruction is first, because of what looks like an enrollment increase. But also from the fact that, thinking about [differentiating] your classroom instruction, of having it become more individualized, means that we would need to have smaller classes. We would need to have teachers have more time for planning periods, because they would really need to closely be able to monitor what their students are doing.

With that being said, particularly at the high school level, you would need to be able to hire more teachers to be able to do this, and we've been trying to hold the line on that. While I understand that, and while I understand why we've had to do that I'm still concerned that, as a result of our budget issues of the last couple of years that, while I think instruction is still being funded well, I think it could be funded better. And I think if we had more teachers we would be able to provide more individual attention, particularly at the lower, elementary school levels.

The other thing that I would really like to look at, and this is something that you and I, Brian, have talked about in the past when you were on the Board, foreign languages at the elementary school level. I would love to see us add back into our curriculum foreign languages at the elementary school level. But in order to do that it means changes in school start time. Elementary school is not like it was in the old days. All that time is taken up with things. And just to add maybe 15 minutes of foreign language instruction would mean having to add time to the school day, which would mess up the bus schedules; it's a snowball effect on a lot of different things, custodial. A lot of people don't realize that 15 minutes may seem like a little bit, but it has a big snowball effect when it comes to adding to the budget. And having to hire more teachers and having to maybe get more buses and change more bus schedules. So while I would love to see us have initiative to add foreign language at the elementary school level, I don't know the exact price in the budget. I think we had a meeting a few months back where we talked about it, and the initiative would be rather high. So these are all kinds of dreams that I have that I think would seriously improve instruction, but if we can do it or not, I'm not sure. I believe in fiscal accountability, and these are some of those

wonderful, nice-to-have things that if we had a couple more million dollars I would support, but it all depends on what we have available.

Primary instruction, your everyday instruction, primary subjects, arts, music, and theater and stuff like that, we need to make sure that continues. The same with having music teachers at the elementary schools for instance, and PE teachers, and those kinds of teachers available. Every year is a new budget year, and every year we look with hope to see some really good initiative being able to come in. And I'm going to continue hoping that we're going to continue doing these things, but I'm going to continue to be realistic about the fact that we're going to have bad budget years until there's a real economic upturn.

9. Business leaders and social service agencies say that new investments are sorely needed in the area of early childhood education. Will you work with the Albemarle Supervisors to make pre-K education and quality childcare a priority and if so how?

This goes back to the achievement gap question, which is that there are a number of students in these gap groups that don't start with the same base of knowledge as some of our other students do. And that is why one of those things that they want to provide more of to address this gap is more preschool education. And I agree with this. I think adding preschool education is important. I think all children can benefit from it, and I definitely agree that investment is needed in that area, but it goes back to budget. Again, it goes back to what is available in the budget and where this comes from. There might be some grants out there and that's great. We have Bright Stars and we have a number of students coming into Bright Stars, but what about the waitlist for Bright Stars. I also say again, and I've spoken with a number of Supervisors about this. I would love to see if I can, if it was the best of all possible worlds, I think preschool education would benefit everybody and that everybody should have access to it, and not just a few. Because if we could start kids out on the right foot from the time they are very little and develop a love of learning from the time they are very little, then everybody would be able to start out at that same baseline. So for me, I would love to see it for everybody. Can we do that? It all depends on where the money is, on if the money is there.

The state likes to talk a lot about preschool education, but they could pony up some money for it too. It's great to talk about, and it's great to use it as a way to say "Hey, I'm for education." Well I'm on the School Board, I'm for education, and I would love to see preschool education for everybody. I would love to see preschool education for those kids on the Bright Stars waiting list, but it all depends on the money factor, and if the money is not there, can we ask the tax payers to pay more for it? I don't know. That would be something

to ask the tax payers. I have my wants and desires, but again, I know that fiscal accountability is something we need to think about.