



2013 Albemarle School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Eric Strucko (Samuel Miller)

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 24, 2013 interview with Eric Strucko (Samuel Miller). The candidates seeking election in other districts include and Kate Acuff (Jack Jouett) and Pam Moynihan (Rio).

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

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

INTERVIEW

Mr. Strucko, 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.

I am an incumbent. I have served on the school board for the last four years and that is valuable experience that offers me insight into how the board operates and gives me an ability to really figure out ways to push issues through the board and how to trigger discussions.

I have also had time and experience on other school boards in Albemarle County. In 2002, Governor Mark Warner appointed me to the Miller School of Albemarle Board of Trustees. I served there for 3 years. I was also on the board of the Free Union Country School for 5 years and served as their treasurer. I was on the County's Long Range Planning Advisory Committee for three years. So that's the list of my board experience.

In terms of personal qualifications, I am in the process of completing my sixth academic degree. So education is an important part of my everyday life, not just through board service, but through my own experiences.

Most importantly, I am the parent of 2 Albemarle County Public School students, my daughter Claire is 11 years old and she is a sixth grader at Henley Middle School and my son David is 15 and he is a sophomore at Western Albemarle High School.

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

Selecting a single top priority is difficult. My experience the last 4 years on the board has demonstrated to me that issues do emerge that you do not anticipate and you have to move quickly to re-prioritize what you think you are going to be doing.

I have a general overarching priority, and that is to be an active representative to serve as an active representative of a constituency here in Albemarle County that really has high expectations and high demands for the public school system. I believe the people that I represent really expect Albemarle County Public Schools to meet the highest standards with regard to instruction, curriculum, classroom opportunities and the way the schools are run. That's my goal for the next 4 years.

There are particular things that I want to focus on. I want to make sure that Yancey Elementary School has a future here and continues to serve the Esmont community. That the education climate improves at Walton Middle School. That we really understand the impact of changing the high school scheduling [to an 8 period day] that we did a few years ago on how the students perform including the admission rates into the top colleges and

universities in the country. And I want to start laying down strong plans for the future demands of Henley Middle School and Western Albemarle High School. I think the physical buildings there will start reaching capacity quickly if projections play out and I'd like to have a solid plan in place for those two institutions.

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

We like to say that we are. We like to say that we are putting measures in place to truly recruit and retain the best, whether it is through competitive compensation or the professional climate that we offer here. We give teachers an opportunity to continue to develop as educators through training programs and that they have a measure of autonomy in the classroom to do instruction as they see fit.

But I do think that true measures of our success are really student performance. How are our students doing throughout their school career here in Albemarle County? I think it culminates in high school, and I do think we need to look at the admission patterns in the top 25 national universities or liberal arts colleges, the number of advanced diplomas that our students are earning, are they increasing, and even the general graduation rates. Of the 2 or 3 percent that don't graduate, what are we doing to reach 100 percent?

I also think that constant communication with parents is key. Are they satisfied with the educational experience that their children are having here in the public schools, and if not what particular aspects are we not delivering? I think ultimately that satisfaction comes from that child's experience in the classroom, so if that's positive, then I know we are recruiting and retaining the best teachers.

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

Again, a very good question and a difficult issue. We have placed a lot of attention on the achievement gap, at least with grand intentions. We talk about the gap constantly at our school board meetings [and] we listen to the observations of the administration with regard to some of the drivers behind the gap. I have heard a number of theories, I just haven't really seen a focused effort to go into the elementary schools in particular and help our teachers in various schools use different methods to make sure that all their students perform well. I really do think that effort has to be focused on the elementary schools. We have a cohort of experienced and accomplished educators we call coaches. I'd like to see the work plan for those coaches really focus on closing the achievement gap in elementary schools and target that effort.

Just recently we learned that 3 of our elementary schools failed to make the accreditation levels on the SOL tests – Yancey Elementary School, Red Hill Elementary School, and Scottsville. I would hope to see in the coming year that our coaches are focused on those 3 institutions to really see what's happening in the classroom, what challenges those teachers are facing and offer them good advice and tactics to make sure that those students in particular do well next year.

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

City-county cooperation—that's been a topic of discussion and good intentions for years. I've tried to be optimistic about the potential for cooperative projects and arrangements, but the realist in me says that the probability, the chances of that happening, are pretty slim unless we can really focus in on a very narrow and particular area. In the past we have tried everything from combining resources, on things that would appear simple—bus routes, supplies and purchasing—but nothing seems to come to fruition. We've even talked about planning a high-technology high school together where the city would offer curriculum ideas and the teaching corps and the county could offer the physical space and we could maybe partner with Piedmont Virginia Community College. It seems like a really good idea but we get very little traction. I am not looking to place blame on the city side or the county side, I am just thinking that when it comes down to city-county relations it's tough.

The real center of disputes is money. As long as the revenue sharing agreement is in place between Albemarle County and Charlottesville, I think there will always be tensions.

I was part of the vote to try and reconfigure the [state budget] formula that calculates the transition of funds from one jurisdiction to the other and that caused a rift. A lot of tensions I think, whether they are active and open, or just linger beneath a calm surface, they are there.

One area that I would like to explore, an area where both jurisdictions can benefit, is looking at the high school level perhaps with some open enrollment plans so city students can attend county schools and vice versa. We've been doing a lot with academy development in Albemarle County, whether it's the Math Science and Engineering Academy at Albemarle High School or the Health Sciences Academy at Monticello—those are the two in existence today, we are developing a third at Western [Albemarle High School]. If we can maybe encourage open enrollment in the academies, get an academy started at Charlottesville where there is open enrollment, that may very well be an area where we can bridge the divide a little bit.

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

Like anybody who serves on the school board that has to meet state requirements or federal, the idea of standardized tests draws feelings of serious concern. We are in an era of accountability, no question about it. Organizations that serve as funding sources for the schools really want measures in place so they can see if we are using their invested dollar wisely.

I don't think we will ever get away from standardized tests. They have been around since I was in school, and of course the SATs and the ACTs are standardized tests, from a different source, but are still very much a part of a student's life. I don't think we will ever get away from them, but I do think they can, if proliferated to a point where they are the focus of the curriculum in the classroom, they can be very distracting and take the learning experience away from critical learning skills like critical evaluation. We find that our students excel when the curriculum's focused there and not on answering a standardized test question accurately.

My personal belief, and I've seen this demonstrated first-hand, is a good teacher with a strong curriculum can focus the students toward critical learning skills and the standardized tests become an afterthought. A student that may be struggling to get a B in an honors history class will get an advanced pass score on a Standards of Learning test, and the curriculum wasn't geared toward the test. Now my examples are honors students, these are exceptional students, but I do think that if we focus on strong teaching and a good curriculum that the students will do well on any standardized test.

But I do have concerns that the number and the emphasis placed upon [standardized tests] is reaching a point where we have to push back. And just recently the Albemarle County School Board did just that, pushing back on the way that accrediting bodies are looking at test scores and how they treat them. I think there is going to be a bit of a rebellion against standardized tests, because just as we're held accountable through those test scores, the oversight bodies that are putting those tests out are going to be held accountable for the quality of the tests themselves. Are they assessing what we really want to assess? I think the debate will rage on.

My feeling is there's a place for them but it shouldn't be the emphasis of the curriculum or the classroom experience for our students.

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

Another topic of a lot of discussion and debate. I see two forces at play that will shape the characteristics of the future high school--one, financial forces.

The typical high school is generally a ranch-style facility that consumes a large footprint. Finding 100 acres for a new high school site to handle the facility plus the athletic fields, and parking, and all the other ancillary services that need to be accommodated is going to be very difficult and or expensive. So I do think that we have to look at a new notion of facilities in the future to keep a new high school building within our ability to pay for it.

The second force at play, accompanying the financial pressures, is the presence of new technologies. I think learning is really changing shape. Online courses, asynchronous discussion groups, having materials available for guided self-study, those seem to be the new emerging trends in academia, whether it's at the university level or high school level. I think that leveraging the technology, and a new desire among students to guide a part of their educational experience, would help us plan a new high school. The need for all the ancillary space may not be necessary--space could be shared and not dedicated. So I do think the technology and the financial pressures will shape our vision of what a new high school building would be.

What I am seeing is a smaller facility that does use various technologies to enhance learning. I see shared space as well. So I'm optimistic about the future in this regard. I think that Albemarle County has an opportunity to be at the forefront of the thinking regarding high school facilities, the curriculum, and the mechanism used to deliver that curriculum in the future. I'd like over the next 4 years to really focus on laying out the plans for that.

So again, I see a smaller building that doesn't have the appearance of the typical high school but that is wired for technology.

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 capital budget and more funding. I think over the last several years, as the economy experienced a downturn, as local government, state government, and even the federal government looked to really contract the budget, our capital spending plan really took a hit.

I do think that over the course of the last 4-5 years the facilities in our community [have gone] into deficit. We are trying to squeeze useful lives beyond the typical expectation regarding technology and even brick and mortar facilities. We've had a maintenance budget with maybe one [new] project in the capital plan for many years and I do think that we have a facilities disparity.

I'll use elementary schools as an example. I think Greer Elementary School experienced the last significant construction project and the space is

beautiful. Those kindergarten, first and second graders really have a contemporary learning space. I compare that to the students at Yancey Elementary School—a smaller school, more remote—but the learning spaces are very different. I think we need to start closing that disparity which means that we have to start dedicating more funds to capital.

I do think we missed an opportunity. As the economy went into recession, fiscal policy was fairly immediate and obvious, resulting in some of the lowest interest rates we have seen ever, and savvy organizations really took advantage of that. That's when they started going to the capital markets, issuing bonds, where interest rates are extraordinarily low, and really investing in facilities. Albemarle County did not take advantage of that.

I tried to make the case on several [occasions] and unfortunately the school board does not have the power over the purse, so I had to attempt to try to convince several [members of the Albemarle Board of] Supervisors that now was the time to actually issue debt and in the long run taxpayers would benefit because of the low interest rates. And we could stimulate our local economy through construction projects at the schools.

But that argument did not prevail, so here we are. I do think interest rates still offer an opportunity, though not as lucrative as in the past, though I do think we need to really beef up our capital budget and that's what I'll be advocating for over the next 4 years.

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?

Yes. The simple answer is yes. I think the wisdom of the business leaders and social services agencies that are saying new investments are needed in early childhood education really understand what adds value to a community.

One of the first areas of evaluation of any community is the strength of the public school system. I think that attracts people to come here to work and to live. I think that also attracts businesses. Businesses will go where the local governments are strong in terms of delivering services with public education. It makes localities a desirable place to germinate a business, plus if we are attracting people, this is where the market is, you move where your customers are. So I think public education is at the center of it.

If there is any one vulnerable area in public education it probably is that early childhood experience, so I think that's a great area to target. I do believe in pre-K education. We have it at a few of our schools, but it's not spread out to all the elementary schools as it should be.

I like to start with good information. I would ask the administration, and I would participate in it as well, for an assessment of what elementary schools are facing the greatest demand for pre-K education. Where are the students coming in where English is a second language and fundamental communication is a problem? Or where students are coming in to elementary school deficient in terms of fundamental skills--math, reasoning and reading. Once we have targeted places where we can intervene I would work to continue to develop programming in pre-K education in those areas.

I have to admit I don't know the extent of the problem as of right now, so probably my first step would be to educate myself on what we are facing and then add that as a priority in our annual budgeting.