



2013 Albemarle School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Kate Acuff (Jack Jouett)

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 Tim Shea's September 25, 2013 interview with Kate Acuff (Jack Jouett). The candidates seeking election in other districts include Pam Moynihan (Rio) and Eric Strucko (Samuel Miller).

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. Acuff, 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.

By statute, as you know, all that is required is that I am a resident, which I, of course, am. But beyond that I have professional training, experience, and skills in a variety of areas. I have a background in law and in policy, and I think that will help me add value to the board in untangling the mix of federal, state, and local, statutes, policies, regulations and ordinances that affect everything we do with our kids, whether we're transporting them, we're protecting their heads in football practice, we're feeding them, etc.

I also have graduate degrees and experience in both science and public health, both of which the County has endorsed in terms of developing 3 different academies at the high schools, whether it's the Health and Medical Sciences Academy at Monticello, MESA at Albemarle, or the up-and-coming Environmental Sciences at Western. I'm very interested in all of those, and those subject areas have all been identified as areas of job growth, so I'm really interested in that.

But I think backing up, I'm interested in science education for everyone. I think we have an appallingly low science literacy in the country. I don't know what happens between the time kids start school and the time they get out. All children at five years old are interested in dinosaurs and why the sky is blue, but you ask an 8th grader and they could care less all too often. I guess I'm colored by the fact that my father was a middle school science teacher for forty years, so I've always been excited about it. So I'm interested both at the job end and encouraging that throughout, and I think health is a significant issue in students' performances, whether it's emotional and behavioral issues, whether there's an outbreak of pink eye and half of the 1st grade stays home, or whether it's making accommodations for Special Education students. Discipline issues, obesity, there's a whole lot of health issues that we need to get a handle on.

I think all of those will add value, I also worked in the public interest area for many years. I have collaborated across disciplines and agencies, and public and private, and I think those skills could possibly be useful.

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

I've cheated and looked at two. I think pre-K is one. Strengthening the quality of pre-K and broadening enrollment, at least to all at-risk kids, and perhaps even more broadly. I think it's critical to addressing the achievement gap and getting kids ready for school.

The second area is in the area of world languages. I know I'm not alone in thinking that is important. But strengthening that and bringing that down to elementary school level. The science is clear that kids learn languages more easily at earlier ages, so waiting until they're a sophomore in high school to start taking Spanish doesn't make sense. And I think there's a lot of cognitive benefits beyond language acquisition that have been identified. So those would be the two areas.

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

From what I've looked at I think that the answer is yes. There doing a good job of recruiting the teachers in terms of promoting their professional development and in assessing how well they do. For example, in 2011 there were 927 applications for 105 spots, so there's a depth of candidates to choose from. Of those, 100% of those who were ultimately selected were deemed highly qualified by No Child Left Behind standards. At least half of those had Masters Degrees, 1/3 of them had at least 5 years of teaching experience. In terms of the application process, applicants, in addition to a naked CV, fill out written questions so you get a better profile of who this person is. And they're hired at the school level. The principals interview them and see if they match. You don't just go to the division and hire 10 math teachers, you suit the teacher to the school. Beyond that, once they are in the program, they have a teacher assessment plan, they're assigned a coach, and their progress is monitored.

In terms of the assessment, it's pretty detailed. They have a teacher assessment plan that they sign on to begin with. They know what is expected of them. About 40% of their assessment is student progress through the course of the year. And then they also have visits, or observations of their teachers' teaching skills by principals, senior staff, maybe their coach as well, and all of that goes into their evaluation.

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

Achievement gaps are not new news. I think originally it was documented in 1966 by the Coleman Report by the Department of Education. It is a combination of community and home factors, and school factors. We know that the disparities between income groups, racial groups, and in some subjects, gender is even apparent when they enter pre-k. So it is real and it needs to be addressed. Historically, sometimes schools have made it worse because of the way schools are funded. Historically, with property taxes, higher income neighborhoods had better schools and better teachers. So how do we close it? I think the answer is that there is no one fix. I think necessary, but not sufficient, is, as I said before, pre-k. We need to make sure that the

kids are ready to learn in kindergarten, so pre-k would be a high priority for me.

But they're aren't just a car that you use a jumper cable on and start it. The home and community deficiencies last throughout school so you need interventions along the way and you need to pay special attention. I think the AVID program at Jack Jouett, which is identifying kids that have good potential, but maybe don't have a family history of going on to higher education, or staying in school even, is really important. And we need to have interventions and monitoring along the way.

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

I think this is a tough one. I think conceptually it's easy to say that the two school districts, which are side-by-side, should be collaborating more. But for a variety of reasons it's been difficult to do. I seem to be beating the same drum, but I do think that there could be cooperation in pre-k and strengthening that effort.

Another area could be in professional development. I know that the schools got together and tried to collaborate on even health insurance and that proved insurmountable because of different costs in the two groups. But I would look at those sorts of things that are outside of as much scrutiny as some of the other issues. So pre-k, professional development.

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

I recognize the desire or impulse to have some mechanism to measure student achievement to see how well we're doing. How we'll we're doing within Virginia, within the county, and even internationally. I don't think we can get rid of them. I think we can continue to make them better and answer the questions that we actually have. I find it somewhat challenging in that Virginia's SOLs, although most people think that they're pretty good, they don't tell us anything about how Virginia students do compared to students in Maryland or North Carolina or Oregon, and I think that's important information.

And we have enormous costs associated with having 50 states with at least 50 different metrics that don't tell us much. We're getting a lot of pushback from business and universities and other colleges, because they don't know what scoring high on a Virginia SOL means, compared with New York kids scoring high on their test. It's hard to make sense of it, so I think we need something more than what we've got.

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

As you know, the recent report of the long-term planning committee recommended expanding both Monticello and Western to accommodate the growth. And that is, for the short term, a very bricks-and-mortar type response, and one that the School Board listened to. But it has not taken off the table building a new school. I think the issues for the new school are, where is the growth? I've not done a demographic study, but driving up 29 it looks like there is a lot of growth in that direction. Where to build it, when to build it, and what kind of school, which might be what this question is going for. That's a big question.

I think it's a question that being answered somewhat in the examination of how to use Yancey, down in Scottsville, because their student population is going down, but there's an enormous community desire to keep the school there. So they're considering re-purposing the school, or expanding the purpose of the school. I think I would also like to investigate further the school of the future that Philadelphia schools have been working on with Microsoft. Even in the schools we have, we're redesigning space for the libraries, collaboration for projects. We don't have enough outlets for the computers, we have [wires] dropping from the ceiling everywhere.

So there are those kinds of constraints, but we're also pushing students out to do internships and do virtual classes, to take classes at UVA or PVCC. So the question is, do we need the bricks and mortar to accommodate 1,000 students, 8 hours a day in rows in desks. I don't know the answer to that. But I think the answer to that could be pretty exciting to that, in terms of building a resource, an educational facility that serves not only those students, but serves the broader community. To be determined.

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?

I have not done a forensic examination of what has happened to the budget in the past decade. I know there's been belt-tightening in the past decade. There's been maintenance of effort for the past 4 years. And I do know that in 2009 there was a substantial cut to professional development of teachers, some of which has been restored. And I also know that reimbursement for teachers to take classes or go to conferences is really low. I don't know if there's any pegging of taking a course at UVA, but the \$250, \$500 max a year, I'm not sure what the hourly tuition is there, but it's probably more than that.

So I don't see how we can have schools for the 21st century without teachers equipped for the 21st century, so we need to examine that. Maybe we're spending enough, I don't know. I know I've talked to several teachers and teachers groups who are concerned about that. It's very difficult. I know the County had supported the idea of teachers getting board certification. But that's an expensive process of upfront, I think \$2,500, and after-the-fact, now I think the County would reimburse half of that. So I think that's an area. It's not a very appealing area for people in the community to think that you have to pay for this, but I think you have to be serious about keeping our teachers up to date.

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?

That has been one of my themes today. It is critically important, and I think whenever you're implementing or advocating a policy you've got to sell it and you've got to persuade people that it's worth it. The National Institute for Research in Early Education have done studies, and they really show that for every dollar invested in early childhood education, you get \$7 in return, in terms of kids stay in school longer, they have better job potential, they have less involvement with law enforcement, bumps along the way, discipline problems.

So I think the combination of the investment and the return, plus the fact that businesses are really advocating for this. There was a conference for this this week in Atlanta by the US Department of Education, and part of that was businesses such as Dominion Power really emphasizing the need to invest in early childhood education. So we need to get business leaders involved in making the case for the community to support it.