



2013 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Ned Michie

On November 5, 2013, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on the Charlottesville School Board. This recording is Tim Shea's September 25, 2013 interview with Ned Michie. The other candidates in this race include: Leah Puryear and Juandiego Wade.

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

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

INTERVIEW

Mr. Michie, 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 City 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 Charlottesville School Board.

Well I've been on the School Board for about nine years, so I think that qualifies me, but prior to being on the School Board I was an active parent volunteer on the PTOs, PTO president of the elementary school, then on the PTO Council, which has one representative from each school and I did that for a number of years. I was on the QUEST Advisory Board as a parent and just generally involved as a parent. I've also been involved in a number of boards in the City, both prior to and currently, I'm on the Rivanna Trails Board and have been for a number of years now. I'm also involved with boards and committees with the Piedmont Housing Alliance and those kinds of experiences help me know how to be a good board's person.

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

Going back to question 1 if I may first, I should have noted that I also went to Charlottesville schools all the way from grade school through high school, and so I think that also gives me an inside prospective and having lived in Charlottesville my whole life gives me an important historical background.

As to the second question, priorities, you know I think we're on a strong course, we have strong leadership in the schools with Dr. Atkins, she's really transformed the schools under her leadership and so the number one priority is to continue to be supportive of her excellent leadership. But within that, I certainly want us to continue to focus on things that I think are going to make the biggest difference in consultation with Dr. Atkins and her team and other Board members, but all the research suggests that teaching quality is the most important factor in making a difference in achievement, and so I want us to continue to focus on improving teacher quality.

We have a very strong teaching core, but like every school division—public, private, anywhere else—not every teacher is a great teacher, and so I would like us to continue to focus on what we can do to improve, first, teaching, so we don't have to go back and remediate as much and so teachers continue to have the support they need in order to differentiate between kids at different levels within their classes.

In Charlottesville, I think we have perhaps a bigger bi-modal population, more diverse, than most other jurisdictions. We have really the highest of the high achievers that go to every possible high-end education college that there is, and we also have a significant amount of poverty, where the kids are at-risk and struggle academically. A significant number continue to struggle and so teacher development I think is critically important and I do want us to continue focusing on finding best practices.

And our professional development program has greatly improved over the years under Dr. Atkins leadership, but I continue to wonder what more we can do, maybe turning to a coaching model than a seminar model, so continuing to work on that is a priority.

I think that Charlottesville has been a leader in the state in early-childhood education, we have five, we're up to five preschool classes. These are locally-funded preschool classes, and all the studies suggest that money is well-spent at the preschool age so most, our four-year-old classes serve most at-risk kids we believe in our community, and that's state funded. But the three-year-old classes are what we've added and what we're paying for locally and it's an expensive thing to do. Each class has a teacher and an aid, and the teach I think we have 12 kids per class, and so it's an expensive proposition but we think it has paid big dividends and the kids that have been in the three-year-old, that go to a quality three-year-old and a quality four-year-old program before hitting kindergarten makes a significant difference, and so I'd like to see us continue to be able to expand that. We've been through a time of tough recessions and have not been able to expand the program for the last several years, but I'd like to see us look for opportunities to expand that in the coming years as hopefully budgets start to turn around during the economic recovery.

I'd like to continue to push for reconfiguration. I want to see us at least develop a plan that's a firm plan of when we're going to get to that. Or if we're not going to get to that I think we need to decide that, but I think a lot of people in the community are wondering when we're going to get to that. And as part of the dialogue we're having with City Council and City Council has formed this Blue Ribbon Commission to think about school funding, have a citizens group of experts, and they're going to be thinking about not only the operating budget, but also capital improvement budgets is our understanding. And we had recent discussions to make sure that that is a topic that they're going to consider, and so I hope coming out of that commission there's going to be some real dialogue with the City and the residents deciding how we get to reconfiguration. I'd like it to happen within 5 years, but I don't know if that's going to happen but I do want to continue to push forward with that idea because I think it's the right way for this division to go.

This school system has been fortunate to not, well the City has been fortunate that we haven't had to build new schools because of enrollment like many other places including Albemarle that have been forced to build new buildings and add additions and that sort of thing and that's been nice but as a result our school buildings are essentially the same school buildings they've been, particularly Walker and Buford, and I think it's time for the community to really reinvesting in them and building a really modern learning community. So

that's one of the things, it looks like we're going to talk about that a little more later.

I think we need to continue to push towards critical thinking skills and problem-based learning so that, and I see we're going to be talking about assessments later, but I think a lot of us, including people in the division and central office are worried that because of accountability testing, that we're sort of forced to spend too much time on sort of test prep, and not enough time on deep learning and critical thinking skills, so I think that's a challenge for the, an ongoing challenge for the coming years to delve into that deeper.

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

I think we do a great job of recruiting quality teachers. A lot of the teachers are coming in with experience. Teachers come to Charlottesville because they're looking for a challenge and they know that our division has this significantly bi-modal population and a lot of diversity, which really brings a lot of richness to our school division, so I do think that we get quality applicants. We continue to keep getting quality applicants through pay, our pay is at or above the regional pay scale and we have a nice benefit package that we offer teachers, and so I think that's important to support continuing to get high quality teachers.

The teacher evaluation forms have continued to evolve since I've been on the Board. When I first got on the Board we were really not, I think, doing a very good job at teacher evaluations, but that's been a real point of emphasis in the past 5 years or so, and our evaluation process and forms are really significantly better. Administrators spend a lot of their time going out, probably on a daily basis, in going into classrooms and looking to make sure that good teaching is going on. They have a list of what's called walk throughs...the do Walk Throughs, they have a list of Look Fors, and so when they go into a class they just stop in briefly and look for student engagement, are the students participating in the class or are they sitting back, is it a lecture style going on or more of a participatory exercise.

So they have this long list of look throughs that they're doing when they're walking through as I say on a very regular basis to see what's going on and make sure that quality teaching is going on in our classrooms. These days they're making notes digitally on, I think their phones probably, and we have software that they're able to do this, and so that's been sort of an evolving thing...

[man in need of directions enters]

...for the listeners, somebody just popped into the interview room here and asked us an unrelated question about directions, and so that's why there's a break in the action here...

...and so the evaluation forms have changed a lot over the years and they are continuing to change and part of that is a response to state and federal mandates. Part of the teacher evaluation process now has to include measurable growth measures. And so our staff has worked hard over the last years to work with teacher to develop growth measure that everybody thinks are fair. And so that's been implemented now as a brand new thing.

And so I think we're doing a lot to assess teacher quality and trying to work on it. Again as I said in the second question, I think teacher quality is critically important. We have a teacher mentor who works with our new teachers and also works with general professional development for other teachers. It needs to be a point of emphasis, continue to be a point of emphasis.

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

Obviously this is a question that every school division everywhere struggles with. The essential reason is that there's a high correlation between poverty and struggling in school and as long as we have poverty, presumably we're going to continue to have kids who have risk factors for having difficulties at school. Poverty just brings so many other elements into a child's life that make school less important and parents maybe had a bad experience in school or didn't do well in school themselves and so it can be cyclical and there can just be a struggle to eat food, struggle for time, there's not a quiet place to do homework, just a general lack of verbal richness at the home, particularly in the early years is when research shows that is just critical. Kids that don't grow up in a word-rich environment suffer when they get to school, so it's a bigger problem than the schools and it needs a bigger answer than the schools and I think that the City of Charlottesville is a progressive city and is continuing to look for ways to help out with the underlying issues.

We were fortunate to get, after a couple of years of trying, a major grant, I think it's called the Promise Neighborhood Grant, it's working in the 10th and Page Street area and the Westhaven Community and that's brought a lot of resources to bare to help with a lot of the underlying issues. And recently they just installed Wifi for the whole Westhaven Community, and I think that's really important, particularly because our school division now how a 1:1 computer initiative for middle school and high school, and the high school kids can take their computers home and so I think that's really important, to give them sort of a level playing field when it comes to digital access. And I'd like

to see us able to get that access to other public housing communities, again so that the playing field is more evenly based on that.

You know as far as the one thing that you can do, I don't think there is a one thing you can do. I think you need to focus on all the things that make education work, and that's what teachers are doing every day. Again, teacher quality and high-quality teaching is critically important. I think that preschool is critically important. I think that working with parents is important. To get them to understand that the basic things that they need to be doing to help their children succeed at school. And that's something that I think we could do more of.

We started a couple of years ago a parent university that we have once or twice a year that offers a variety of courses where parents can come in and teach and we've sponsored buses to get there and food and that sort of thing to try increase attendance, and you know, we get some parents that way, but I think we need to continue to look for ways to engage parents who might otherwise not be engaged, and again, just to emphasize the importance of education and what they can be doing at home to help out the situation.

So I think it's a multi-pronged problem and it's going to require a multi-pronged answer that we just need to continue to do the best practices that research points out what those are.

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

I guess initially that I'd like to say that I and the City School Board in general and Central Office are wide open to any and all collaborative efforts that anybody thinks of. The County is not approaching us with any ideas that we are saying no to. We are open to any and all collaborations, and we have a lot of collaborations and our staffs do get along well together, they are in communication with each other about best practices and what we can do to try to improve the education of the area's children.

We had, to come up with one specific example, however, we have had an idea over the past couple of years that it would make sense for the school divisions to collaborate on a virtual school program. Virtual classes are kind of a wave of the future, and now students are required to take at least one virtual class before they graduate. It's also the kind of thing where a lot of private vendors are coming in and even other school divisions are creating virtual classrooms and high school programs, where they can essentially lure kids away from our programs if we don't have them and essentially take our enrollment if we don't have a virtual program. So it makes sense. It's a wave of the future, it's a way to give kids yet another option for learning, and different kids learn in different ways, and so it's important just to have options

out there and virtual learning is a way that some kids can really achieve and move at their own pace and do it in spare time and that sort of thing, so it makes for us to develop them. Each division is working on them, we've been talking to each other about how to do a joint program and so far that has not been gelling and I would like to continue to see us move towards a joint program because I think there's a lot of logic in it, and so I hope that that can come about.

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

I think that first off I want to start off with a compliment for it. I think that No Child Left Behind and the SOLs has done a very important service in that through the testing and the requirements it has shined a light on the significant number of kids who have struggled over the years and have not been succeeding in schools. I think that before those high-stakes tests were introduced that you wouldn't hear much about that. You would hear about all of the successes at a school and there was this and there was this large group of students who were continuing to struggle and not succeed. And so I think these tests have shown a light on the problem and made it clear that that's not acceptable, because it's not acceptable.

With that said I think there's been a lot of problems with the high-stakes testing and they continue to try to make tweaks. Virginia was given a waiver from No Child Left behind, but essentially to apply for the waiver and qualify for the waiver, you essentially have to adopt a lot of the things that are essentially part of No Child Left Behind with high-stakes testing and that sort of thing and so were still in high-stakes assessments.

I think that having one test at the end of the year be the be-all end-all is not the way to go. I think it ought to be smaller tests over the course of the year and measuring growth. There has been a lot of talk about moving towards a growth model so that we see how much kids are growing in their education. And that's not perfect either, because kids at the high end, for instance, because if they're getting A's then they don't have that much room to move. And so a high-functioning school that has really high-achieving kids may not show that much growth, so it's important to have assessments, it's important to have accountability, I do think we need to move more towards a growth model and look for better ways to analyze, define, explain, show what schools are doing well and what schools aren't doing well. I think that these tests and the labels that get put on them as a result of these tests are really not accurate and fair.

Our schools division is blessed to have an extremely strong fine arts program that wins all kinds of awards and yet, you know, that's not in there. Our school division has an extremely strong AP program, probably the strongest in the

region, and again those kinds of things just aren't analyzed as part of this or part of the grading system that they're now coming up with.

So the assessments, I think we need to have something. I think some of the governor's race could change that. I think Terry McAuliffe has said that he's not in favor of the end-of-the-year high-stakes testing and I think that could be an important change if we get to that. I think that the way things are now that we tend to focus too much on the testing and that's something we hear from the parents is that they feel like, and this is true in all of the public schools around here, that you hear people complaining that there's too much focus on testing. I think we need to get away from that, and that goes back into critical thinking and hands-on problem-solving learning and those things are tougher to have standardized tests for, but I know that smart people are looking into these issues and we need to continue to look for ways to have a fairer way to continue to have accountability.

7. Would you support the regular involvement of a non-voting student representative on your School Board?

That's not something that we've ever really had much of a discussion about on our board. I'm certainly open to the idea. I think Albemarle is looking to move towards that. I think that their approach to do it, if one were to do it, would be a way to go where you don't have one person who is there all year all semester, that you'd have sort of a rotating thing of students coming through. So I'm certainly open to the discussion. I don't think it's a panacea for getting student input. I think that essentially you're hearing from one person and the student body.

I think that we do surveys and I think that surveys can be an accurate way, in addition to just hearing from parents and students themselves. So I don't think it's a magic anything, but I know that some boards do it and I'm open to the idea.

8. Charlottesville City Council has provided the school division with one-time funds to balance recent budgets. What steps should Council and the School Board take to help build a more sustainable school budget?

That's a dialogue that's going on right now. The City has formed this Blue Ribbon Taskforce with people with a variety of backgrounds and expertise and they are talking about the very issue. I think at the end they're going to do a report and that's scheduled for December, and then the City Council and the School Board will be talking more about it....

I think the biggest factor that has led to the problems that we have is that the state backing off on its commitment to education and cutting funding and I think that's just not appropriate. I think that the state, and maybe again with

improving economy maybe that will start to turn around. But that has been the biggest factor, the cutting of the state mostly, and also some federal funding that has led to, that if we're even going to have the same budget we that had in prior years that City Council has had to come up with more money fund us.

And that's essentially where we've been. We've had a flat budget for I think it's about four years now, and if you're going to give your employees raises, you're going to have to find [other] places to cut. We've cut forty-one positions I think so that we can do some initiatives and give some raises. Also there's cost of living increases that you just don't have any control over or health insurance or contracts with outside vendors. Our contracts with the City for transportation for instance have gone up and when those things go up and your budget is flat you've got to cut other places that are painful and we've spent a lot of time in the last few years cutting and trying to get down to a sustainable level while meeting the needs and expectations of our citizens.

It would save a lot of money to close an elementary school, but every time we think about that we hear strong objections all around and that everybody likes their neighborhood school. And [grade] reconfiguration frankly is part of that. That came from the idea of when we had an efficiency study five years ago by a professional organization that one of many suggestions that they had was closing an elementary school, and that led to the reconfiguration discussions, and what we ended up with was consolidating into one middle school and not having Walker being the upper elementary school that it is but instead be a preschool center. And doing that was going to save, and I don't have the figures right in mind, but it's in the neighborhood of a half-a-million dollars a year in operating expenses by doing the reconfiguration.

We pay rent for our Henry Avenue alternative education program and for the adult education program, I guess about \$80,000 a year each. And so anyway that was part of the reason for moving toward reconfiguration and obviously the capital expenditure of getting to reconfiguration is a big number so it's hard to get that excited about the savings when you're spending a lot of money to get there.

I think we have to continue to look for ways to save money and to be as efficient as we can and I know that the School Board and Central office is committed to continue to do that. But we've been in this process for a few years now where we're trying to make every cut we can while maintaining low class sizes, while maintaining full service elementary schools at each elementary school that are fully staffed with Quest teachers and art teachers and music teachers, and we think that's a high value in the community to have fully staffed elementary schools, even though they're small. That's really where our money is tied up in, is in our small elementary school buildings that are full service and our staff level. That's the reason that we have high per-pupil expenditures, though I think it's important to note that the City's per

capita expenditure for school is actually right at average. And so you hear a lot about the per pupil, but the per capita of City residents spending is right at state average, whereas the City's spending on social services is significantly higher than the state average, for instance.

So I think that this is a dialogue that we need to continue to have and continue to look for efficiencies, but it ultimately comes down to the citizens and whether they want to continue to fund the school system that we have or whether we want to reform and not have full service elementary schools or close an elementary school or lose out on some of the things that make our school system our school system. We don't have to have an elementary Spanish program. Right now we teach Spanish I think starting in Kindergarten. They start getting some Spanish and it's a couple of hours a week, and we've now moved that program all the way through the elementary schools so that every year they're getting Spanish that's more and more advanced that by the time they get to sixth grade now they're going to be taking, they're going to be eligible to take a Spanish course. But we don't have to do that, we don't have to have a Minds in Motion, where the Richmond dance ballet comes in and teaches all of our fourth graders how to dance and move and interpret. They tie in the SOLs when they do that and that costs about \$70,000 or something a year. Our Spanish program costs a few hundred-thousand dollars per year at this point.

And so if we want to not have the school system we have, we can do that. But if the citizens want to continue to have the school system we have then either the City needs to reprioritize where its spending goes, or we need to look for other sources of funding.

9. Do you support the grade reconfiguration plan for city schools such that Buford will house grades 6 through 8 as the only middle school? If so, how will that be funded and can it happen in your next term?

We've spent some time talking about that. I absolutely do continue to support it. I think it's pedagogically correct to have fewer transitions. Right now students are in elementary school up until 4th grade, and then they go to 5th and 6th at Walker and then they have another transition for 7th 8th and Buford and then go to the high school. It's a tough a challenging age to begin with and to throw in transitions like this it's tough on the kids, it's tough on the teachers. The teachers have one less year in middle school to follow the kids and talk to teachers in the building about "Yea I know that Billy. The thing you need to do with him is such and such." And so it's tough on the teachers to have the kids around, and the administrators to not follow the kids for an extra year during these tough transition years.

It's tough on the parents as well. The PTO kind of struggles as well because you get there as a 6th grade parent and this is a much bigger school, even if

you're in leadership at the elementary school level, you're not quite ready to be president or vice president and so then you wait one more year and then you get into leadership. So anyway, the leadership only stays there for one year. So there's a lot of turnover in that and it's tough to have as strong an organization as you could have otherwise. So I think that getting to one middle school is the right thing to do.

I think that even, and the School Board and the community talked about this, that even if you weren't going to have a standard middle school, that Buford itself, just the building needs an upgrade. And we talked about this before, that the City hasn't had to invest major dollars in capital improvements as far as upgrading what you see and the experience in the building. The City has done a great job maintain our schools. Let me be the first to say that. The schools are very well maintained, but Buford and Walker were built in 1965 and that is what they are. They are buildings from 1965 and they haven't really changed since then, except for the very exciting labs that we did get the City to fund because the reconfiguration was being pushed off.

City Council was like, "Well, is there something that we can do in the meantime to make these schools more of a modern learning environment?" And so we took them on tours of the science labs at CHS and Buford, and that was an area that they agreed needed enhancements after all these years. And so we have brand new labs at Buford that have 3D printers. It's part of a collaboration with UVA and the Curry School, and Albemarle has Jack Jouett in the same program. So that's very exciting, and CHS is also getting an advanced manufacturing lab built in to the media center.

So those things are great but still the rest of the building at Buford is still the same building it's been since 1965. It's well maintained, but it's the same building it's been. It's a campus style, there are doors all over the place, you have to go into different buildings, it's a security and HVAC nightmare in that regard. It's not an attractive building. The offices are downstairs, so when you go and drive up to the building you have to figure out where the office is, you have to go downstairs to get there. For a community that does value education and I know our community does, I think that needs to be reflected in the buildings themselves. I think that's something we need to do and we need to get to doing that.

And so if you reinvigorate Buford as its current two-grade standard, you can save some money by just doing that, but it doesn't cost that much more to go and add another grade to it so that it's traditional. And you put the 5th grade back in the elementary school under the reconfiguration plan, which is where it was when I went through the Charlottesville school system. I went to Greenbrier and we were there until 5th grade. And so I think that, and again most parents that we talk to are very happy with their elementary school experience and with staying there another year, which is sort of the standard

model. And the reconfiguration solves other problems that we're having. We pay rent on Henry Avenue, our alternative education program, we're paying rental for adult education, our Central Office staff is now split between two buildings, part of it is at central office 1 next to Walker, and part of it is in the basement at CHS. That is an efficient way for them to be. If they have meetings they have to drive to meetings if they're bringing materials and that sort of thing and they've got to be in a car and it's just not a positive thing for them to be split.

In addition, if we can get them centralized, and the idea was to get them centralized into the Walker building in addition to making it a preschool center, then that frees up the current office space to bring in Henry Avenue and save the money for that and have it closer to a school campus where it can enjoy some of the amenities of a regular school campus. And it would free up the downstairs of CHS to create alternative high school programming, and so there's a lot of advantages to the reconfiguration by moving the preschools out of the elementary schools and into a center. It allows us to grow the 3-year-old preschool program and that's something, again, I was very much an attractor to going with the reconfiguration idea.

So I still remain very much in favor of the reconfiguration. It's a significant expense, and you can only do what you can do, and I understand that. It's going to be a dialogue that we have with the City and frankly with the citizens of the City, because it's again a significant expense and how do you get there, how do you reprioritize current spending or set aside enough money to make this happen? But it's something I very much want to push for and see us realize. I don't know that it's going to happen in the next four years, but I think that in the near future, we ought to have a plan for when it is going to happen so that the community knows what to expect. We do hear a lot of questions in the community about when this is going to happen and so we need to come up with an answer.