



## **2015 Albemarle County School Board Candidate Interview**

*Candidate: Steve Koleszar (I)*

On November 3, 2015, voters in the Scottsville Magisterial District go to the polls to elect their representative on the Albemarle County School Board. This recording is Brian Wheeler's August 17, 2015 interview with Steve Koleszar (I). Koleszar is running unopposed.

*The audio recording of this interview and complete election coverage is available on Charlottesville Tomorrow's website:*

[http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/county\\_elections/](http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/county_elections/)

### **INTERVIEW**

**Mr. Koleszar, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio recording 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, The Daily Progress, 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, the first two questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, for the others you have been provided only the topic in advance. All Albemarle 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. QUALIFICATIONS: Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on the Albemarle County School Board.**

I think my primary experience is that I'm running for re-election. I'm currently in my 20th year on the Albemarle School Board so I've had a wonderful experience being on the board and bring a wealth of knowledge and experience to my board service. Other than that, I'm a parent of two children who have been through Albemarle and graduated from Albemarle High School. In my day job, I'm retired from being an accountant so I understand budgets, I understand numbers, I understand systems. I also bring those skills.

When I was thinking about whether to run again, some of the questions I asked myself are: "Do I still have the passion?" I still have the love for education and the desire to do more to help the children of this county. I still feel like I have an open mind even though I may have heard it before and seen it before. I'm willing to admit when I make mistakes I'm willing to learn. When new facts come in, you should change your opinion.

And I still have the drive I think to push us to new levels, new higher levels of excellence. One of the things you always have to guard against is complacency. If you're moving forward, you're easily sliding back.

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

I have three priorities. One is to continue to raise expectations for student performance. We need always to expect more of our students. If we expect more of our students, we'll get more from our students.

We're in the process of really transforming teaching from 20th century education to 21st century education, and I'll talk about that a little bit later, but continuing to transform teaching to meet the needs of our students' future rather than our past.

The third area I want to really spend more time on is making the case and fighting for more funding for K-12 education. On an inflation-adjusted basis, the state is providing somewhere between \$600 and \$700 less funding per student on a state basis. In Albemarle County, that would be \$8 million or \$9 million. The county government has done a fairly good job, but with the increasing challenges we have, we really, to have the kind of great school system that the people of this community want, we're going to need more funding.

**3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: Business leaders and social service agencies have told local government that new investments are sorely needed in the area of early childhood education. Will you make pre-K education and quality childcare a priority and if so how?**

My feeling is that while pre-K is valuable it's not this panacea, this magic bullet, that everyone seems to think it is. When we're not adequately funding K-12 education, I

have a hard time getting really enthusiastic about pre-K. If the funding becomes available for that, I'll gladly support it, gladly work on it. We added a couple classes this year to Bright Stars. And it does help kids get off to a good start. But I think where we really lose kids is not in that first learning how to read stage. It's about 3rd, 4th and 5th grade when kids start to turn off. And we have to do a better job in our K-12 of continuing to connect and get these students engaged so that their learning will progress. That's a more critical era. Getting behind pre-K is easy because everybody love little tiny kids, but in reality I don't think that's where we need to have our greatest focus.

**4. ONLINE LEARNING: Schools officials have said that graduating students who are literate with technology will benefit the entire community, but many students have said that their teachers often lack the expertise/training to use the technology, and that they don't want their teachers replaced by computers. Please describe the role you think technology should play in the classroom.**

Well, I remember a number of years back that the board was eager to go to one-to-one [computers to students] because Henrico County had just gone to one-to-one. And [Superintendent Kevin] Castner wisely said, 'Our teachers don't know how to teach in that environment. We have to teach our teachers how to teach using that technology before we get the technology.'

We've moved a long way. We now do have one-to-one technology [in grades] six through twelve. I think some of our teachers take to it like a duck to water. Others need a little more help and we always need to be working on improving that. One of the big things that has changed in education is that it used to be that to be educated was to know. To be able to pull out of your head certain key facts and understandings and be able to go. Now those key understandings and facts are online. Our kids now have to be able to do rather than just know. So one of the key skills that we need to be able training our students is how to do research on the internet. How to decide what is a good source and what is a bad source. Where do you really go to get the best information? So that's part of teaching our kids how to do so that when they run up to something they don't know, they can quickly gain that knowledge.

**5. TEACHERS: Are we recruiting the best teachers, measuring their performance effectively and paying competitive salaries? How do we know?**

I think the best way to know how your teachers are doing are to observe them in classrooms, meet with them, talk with them. That kind of subjective [evaluation] really tells you better than any one objective. I would say that improving teaching, improving instruction and learning, is the 'hedgehog concept' of Albemarle County Schools. Everything we do is focused on that. We have what I think is an excellent teacher performance appraisal model that's built on a coaching model where the principal periodically goes through the classroom and randomly observes the teacher and gives them feedback and the teacher sits down with the principal and

reflects on their practices, sets goals for how they can improve their teaching so overall I would say I'm very pleased.

Our pay right now is competitive but a few years ago there was a teacher shortage and our pay wasn't competitive and we had to go aggressively go after pay. We caught up. The recession, a lot of teachers were laid off. Our salaries were very competitive, but we may be headed into another period where there is a teacher shortage. It hasn't hit Albemarle County yet. It's hit some other parts of the country. And I can anticipate that in two or three years, we may have to aggressively go after salaries again because we will find there's a teacher shortage and a bidding war going on.

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

One of the things that I've liked is that we've changed the terminology. We don't really call it an achievement gap now. We call it an opportunity gap. So that some kids come in with much more opportunities and much more experiences. For instance, if a child has never been to a museum and there's a question on the SOL test about a museum, even if he can read it and understand it, he doesn't have all that background knowledge than somebody who has more opportunities because they've been to a museum will be able to answer those kinds of questions.

I used to get into arguments with [Superintendent Kevin] Castner about the achievement gap. My feeling is that, you know, as we do a better job of educating kids, the bell curve just keeps moving. So the kid who came into our classroom as a kindergartner being able to add and subtract unlike fractions is going to be better at math than someone who came into kindergarten barely knowing their numbers. In that sense what we can do is get all students to a high standard. In economics, they talk about an economy having a take-off point. If we can get all of our students to that take-off point where how much they learn depends not on how much they knew coming in, but how hard they want to work and how much they want to learn, then to me that's eliminating the achievement gap. It's getting everybody over a certain standard.

**7. CITY-COUNTY-UVA RELATIONS: Describe a part of the school division that would benefit from increased cooperation by the city, county and / or the University of Virginia and that you would make a priority.**

We already do have a lot of cooperation with the city and the university. Unfortunately, when we get into kind of cooperative deals, we get into this 'well, who's going to pay X amount?' Often a lot of wasted effort goes into who pays for what as each side looks out for their fiduciary responsibilities. One of the proposals that I have made that we've not really done anything with yet is that we set up a flat tuition so that if we have a special program that city people might take advantage of, and we want it to be a cooperative program between the two. Well, okay, the county will run it, and our standard tuition is X. Or if the city is running the cooperative

program and the tuition is X. And then we don't have this every time we do a program that we have to determine a funding formula.

**8. CATEC: Do you support the strategic plan of the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center? Should CATEC build a new facility at Piedmont Virginia Community College?**

I'm currently on the CATEC board and I firmly support our new strategic plan. The key thing about the strategic plan is really working with and developing the partnership with employers. And CATEC has always had an advisory committee but it's been spread over many industries. Under the strategic plan, we'll have an advisory committee just for health and medical sciences.

One of the other things is the partnership with PVCC. PVCC used to have all these advisory committees. Now, CATEC and PVCC will have one advisory committee for health sciences, for construction, for so forth. That ties into the facility at PVCC.

What I think we have to do is get our programs right and then determine where the facility should be and what the facility should look like. I don't have a problem with CATEC being multiple sites. So we might have a CATEC course in health and medical sciences, our CNA course that we're teaching to high school students at PVCC. And maybe adults are taking that same course. And then maybe we do the construction trades and we have PVCC students doing construction trade courses at the current CATEC site. So we shouldn't think of CATEC as a school but a hub of workforce development resources and courses and classes that's meeting the workforce development needs for our students and the workforce development needs for our community.

Again, that's where the partnership comes in. We need employers to tell us what their needs are and how do we get an effective pipeline so that company A needs an employer in six months and we've got an employee who has the training and the skills that they need so that right out of high school or maybe even while they're in high school they can start working either as an internship or paid work.

**9. WORLD LANGUAGES: Would you support a budget initiative to expand world language instruction in the elementary schools?**

The board has had this as a priority and wanted to do this for almost 15 years and for various reasons, mostly cost, we've been slow to move on it. We do have a very effective dual language immersion program now at Cale Elementary. They started developing it about four or five years ago. This year it's gotten to the third grade. I think it is state of the art. It's really great. Everybody gets at least 120 minutes of instruction a week in Spanish, but the kids that are in the dual-language immersion portion of that have half their day in English and half their day in Spanish. And as Dede Jones says, 'monolingualism is the new illiteracy.'

In a very tight budget year, we allocated \$20,000, a very tiny amount of money, so that two new elementary schools can plan and in 2016 hopefully we'll have the

funding and then we'll be able to expand that to two more. Eventually I'd like to see it expand throughout the school division because children are so good at learning languages at that age that it's really almost criminal not to give them the opportunities and the brain development and the language skills that come with the dual language program.

**10. BUDGET: Name one specific area of the school budget that you are concerned about and tell us why.**

Two things. One is enrollment growth. We had a meeting last night and preliminarily we're saying it looks like we're going to have 181 more students than we projected. Okay. We're already projecting a growth of about 150 students so growth puts tremendous strain on our budget. It's almost directly proportional. The more kids you have, the more costs you have.

A secondary area that I'm really concerned about is aging facilities. A lot of our buildings were built 30 years ago and they're starting to show their age. I was down at Walton [Middle School] today talking to people and I was talking to a science teacher and she's in a classroom without natural light. She has old science tables that are starting to fall apart. And not enough outlets. So, updating our aging facilities is one of the challenges but growth is a direct challenge. Last year our number one priority was modernization, enhancing, repairing and upkeeping our facilities. I'm afraid this year our number year priority in the capital improvement program is going to have to be more seats at Woodbrook [Elementary] because of the jump up in enrollment.