



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

*Candidate: David Oberg (I)*

On November 3, 2015, voters in the White Hall Magisterial District go to the polls to elect their representative on the Albemarle County School Board. This recording is Brian Wheeler's August 24, 2015 interview with David Oberg (I). Other candidates in this race include: Caroll Hatcher (I).

*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. Oberg, 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 am the graduate of public schools in Alaska. I am what I think of as the American success story. My grandfather had a fourth grade education, and my father was the first person in our family, and we have a big family, first person in our family to go to college. And I grew up in public schools and ended up going to an Ivy League law school and graduating near the top of my class. To me that is the American success story, and that is what makes America amazing, is our public schools enable that. And the reality is in most countries around the world, that can't happen. If you're born near the bottom end economically, your children and grandchildren are going to be in that same economic status.

I am a law school graduate and I've practiced law for 20 years, which amazes me because I don't feel like I've been alive that long. I worked for the Virginia Education Association for seven years as an advocate for the teachers and public schools, and so I'm intimately familiar not only with public school issues in Virginia, but specifically with Albemarle County, because Albemarle County was my main focus. I'm very educated regarding the budget. I know what's taking place in the schools, and quite frankly, what most motivates me is that I have a child in Albemarle County Public Schools. My daughter was at Crozet Elementary, and is now at Henley Middle School and God willing will graduate from Western Albemarle High School. And I really want to make sure that she and all her friends and classmates have the opportunity to succeed like I did.

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

I want to make sure that the high-stakes, high-risk testing is placed within the scope that it's supposed to be. Those tests have been around forever, but they haven't had the same political stigma that they have today. We took those tests when we were kids, I took them and they were called the SRAs. We took them every year, and they were used by the educators to see where each student was doing well and where each student needed further work. There was no stress, we didn't get upset about the tests. It certainly was not a benchmark for the educators to determine if the educators were meeting some sort of goal. They were used as a tool.

Well, because of the political process we have now, they're taking these tests now and using them as an evaluation technique for the individual educator. So if an individual student does or does not perform well, that reflects poorly or well upon the teacher or upon the school, and I think that's insane. I've witnessed my daughter and her friends, in third grade, becoming really upset about tests that have absolutely no relevance as to their abilities. It's simply supposed to be used as a gauge. I think there is going to be greater pressure by the state and by the federal government to use those tests to "evaluate" our schools and "evaluate" our teachers, and there is a stigma attached to that for our students. It negatively impacts them and I'm going to fight like the dickens to prevent that from happening.

**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?**

Absolutely. We know from lengthy and exhaustive studies that how someone will succeed later in life is directly tied to whether or not they have pre-K education. If your parents read to you when you're a toddler, the reality is that you're light years ahead of a child whose parents didn't. And as it states, there's a socioeconomic basis upon which kids get to go to preschool or don't get to go to preschool. And we have kids, and I've talked to our kindergarten teachers, we have kids coming into our kindergarten who can already read and can already do basic math. In the same class and at the same time, and this boggles my mind, we have children who don't know what a book is. They don't have any association between letters and words. They don't know phonetics, they don't know their alphabets. And from what I've learned by talking to our educators, it's very unlikely that those children will ever catch up with their peers because they've started so far behind. That impacts them for the rest of their lives.

And one of the ways, one of the tools we can use to even that out a little bit is to give children the opportunity to go to pre-K, and that can begin as early as three. These days people are talking about children who are already four, but the reality is that Bright Stars and some of the programs, three-year-olds can start getting some of that support. We also have to educate our families about the importance of pre-K and spending time reading with the children and working with them, and I don't know that we do the best job making sure that everybody knows the opportunities. Because we have some programs that are really outstanding, but when you talk to some of the parents they don't even know that they're there. So I think we need to reach out to the immigrant community, we need to reach out to the people who are underserved by our services and make sure that they know the opportunities that they have.

**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.**

Technology is a tool. It's the same as it has always been. Fifty years ago technology was a tool, and 100 years from now technology will be a tool. I remember when I was in high school, we got our first Apple II Plus computers, and they were state of the art. And the reality is that the kids knew how to use them and the teachers didn't. And that's because they weren't provided the training and they didn't understand the full power of those devices.

My daughter, and I hate to admit it, knows far more about our computer and my phone system and my iPad than I do, and I used to be at the cutting edge of

technology. I was the one who told people how things worked. And the reality is that now my sixth grader is educating me. There's always going to be that aspect because young people are going to adapt to the technology quicker than people over the age of 24. That's just biological.

I think we have to integrate technology into our classrooms, and I think that Albemarle County is actually doing that very well. By the same token, technology can't replace educators, it just can't. One of my concerns is that there is a move to have distance learning. At the college level I think that makes a certain level of sense, but on the local level, what you're risking is the effect of having large lecture classes, okay, and the reality is that there is a cost-efficiency to it. You can save a lot of money doing that. Especially classes like AP US history. If you have schools where you might have two or three students who qualify to take that, does it make sense to have a teacher assigned full-time, you know a partial FTE, to teach that class. Is there not a cost efficiency to say you know what 'Albemarle County, Western Albemarle High School and Monticello and Charlottesville High School and Fluvanna County can pay one teacher and they can all learn over the internet?' I think at some point that is going to happen, but we need to make sure that that doesn't replace the one-on-one, hands-on instruction that our kids need, especially in tenth grade and lower. The social interaction with the teachers is essential, and if we allow technology to replace that, it's going to detriment us in the future.

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

Objection, that's a compound question [laughs]. Are we recruiting the best teachers? Yea, we have great teachers in Albemarle County. This is the community that people apply to. I talk to people from all over the place, and teachers in other counties always want to apply to Albemarle County, and they ask 'How can I get a job there?' And the answer is that you have to be at the top of your class where you're at to get an interview in Albemarle County. So I think we're doing a great job recruiting people. Albemarle County is an incredible place to live, it's an incredible place to teach, and I think our professional staff knows that.

Measuring their performance effectively I think depends on the individual, it depends on the school and it depends on the level. I think we're doing a better job in the last several years of evaluating our new teachers. I think evaluating new teachers in the first three years, which was the law in the state of Virginia, was really insane, because I don't think anybody in any profession, within the first three years, really knows if they're going to be successful or not. I think there's some people who you know 'Wow, that person is going to be dynamite,' and there's going to be people where you say 'Wow, that person really is in the wrong profession.' But the vast majority of us, it takes a while to break into a new profession, it takes a while to get your feet under you. Some people perform very quickly and pick things up, and some people, who will be outstanding, need some time. The law has changed, as you know, so now there is a five year period to do the evaluations, and I think that makes a lot of sense.

What I don't want to see, and there's a movement in this by a lot of people in both parties, and it boggles my mind that it's true, they take federally mandated tests and they try to individually evaluate teachers based upon the results of their students on those tests. And the best explanation as to why that doesn't make sense is that there's a famous baker, he's the CEO of a baking company, and he was asked 'What do you do to make sure you have the best cupcakes possible?' And he says 'Well you want to get the best flour and the best sugar and the best berries.' 'And if you have bad berries what do you do?' He says 'You get rid of those. You don't have those bad berries.' And the educator was asking him and said 'Well, what do you want us to do with our kids who don't succeed? Are they bad berries and should we get rid of them?' And he was aghast, because he was one of the people pushing for 'Hey, we should have standardized tests and that's the evaluation.'

And the reality is I want my best teachers teaching the kids with the most struggles, but if you allow the evaluation system to be based on test scores, the best teachers would be insane to teach the hardest classes. It just wouldn't make sense, and this is what you're going to have, and it's what you have in other states, the newest teachers are getting assigned the lowest-performing classes, and they're the ones with the least amount of experience, the least talent to be teaching them. If you have a class that is under-performing, I want my 25- 30-year veteran, who has 30 years of experience teaching my kids who have problems teaching that class. And yet if you allow the evaluation system to be based on test scores, I guarantee you those teachers are not going to want to. They're going to do everything they can not to teach that class, because that's a great way to get fired.

As far as the competitive salaries, in some levels we're very competitive, in other levels, and HR has a great formula that they use and put forth, I don't know that that formula is fair and accurate in all senses. I think in some of our levels we're doing very well, and in some of our levels we're not doing as well. I think we can do better. I would like to see, you and I both worked on pay performance, not for merit pay straight out, but I think we can use bonus-based systems to get STEM teachers, to get teachers to teach in harder to staff schools. I'd like to see that. If you have a hard-to-staff school, and this is just reality, some of your best teachers get burned out working at some of the hardest schools. And those are the teachers I want in those schools, but I don't want to get them burned out. And unfortunately what happens is they go to a low-performing school where they have economic problems and they go to a Meriwether Lewis [Elementary], or they go to a Brownsville [Elementary] because the reality is there are less socioeconomic problems in those schools. And so there's a sense that it's an easier job.

For our teachers who are teaching in schools where there are problems, where there are socio-economic issues, I would like to see a bonus-based system to give those principals the opportunity to attract the highest level of teachers, and to say 'Look, I know this isn't the easiest level of class.' Take a kindergarten class. If you go to Brownsville, most of your kindergarten class are already going to be able to read, so you're starting out ahead of the game. But in some of our schools, a number of your students aren't even going to speak English when they get to kindergarten. There is a need for really good, advanced, experienced teachers in those schools, and I think

if teachers are willing to go and teach classes like that, we should be willing to compensate them somewhat more. I know that's controversial. I know not everyone is going to like that idea, but I think it makes a lot of sense.

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

We have achievement gaps for a number of reasons, but the primary one, and nobody likes to talk about it, is poverty. The reality is that if you have two parents who are both physicians at UVa, those parents are going to have every resource to make sure that, even if you have a learning disability, that you're going to be taken care of, and that is going to enable that student to succeed. One of the greatest predictors of whether someone is going to be successful in high school is whether they were read to as a child. I took that very much to heart. My child is in sixth grade. I still read to her every night because I know that there's an economic and academic advantage to her later in life. My father was a school teacher and he read to me every night until middle school, and it's just because he believed that was super important. A lot of our kids simply don't have that opportunity, so like I said, when they get to kindergarten, they're already two years behind.

Anybody who runs a race—I'm a terrible, terrible jogger, but I do run races—and I know that there's an advantage to starting toward the front of the pack, because if you start at the front of the pack, there's that much distance where you don't have to catch up. I was a college swimmer, and we used to do handicapped races, and we'd start wherever your best time and my best time, we'd compare them and we'd start them that way, and you'd think we'd finish together, but the reality is it doesn't happen. When you're behind, it is much harder to swim. It's much easier to swim in front, than it is to swim and catch up from behind. Academics is no different. What I told people when they go to college, and I still tell them, is to study really hard those first eight weeks. There's going to be a tendency to enjoy college and to do other things. But if you study really hard for the first eight weeks, and you're ready for the midterms, you're going to get A's, because there's a lot of kids who are going to wait until the eight week mark to try and study, but they will never catch up. If you start studying at mid-terms, you're never going to catch up. And that's for highly successful academic kids.

When you start a child in kindergarten, two years behind someone else, it's virtually impossible for that child to ever pick up that pace, to catch up. Because even if he's super successful, he's two years behind, so it goes back to having that early intervention to make sure that kids have every opportunity to start kindergarten on equal footing. Until we do that, until we invest economically and societally to make sure we do that, we're going to have an achievement gap. I don't care how much you spend as a high school student. If you don't spend it at the front, you'll never catch up.

**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.**

I think having the University in this community is an incredible asset. I think we use some of it to our advantage, but I don't think we use everything. UVA has this great program for elementary school kids where you can study in January and February, every Saturday you can go for an enrichment, and my child did this because she's the child of two lawyers and we made sure she had that opportunity. Most of the kids there were from Fluvanna. It was like, I don't know why every parent of people in Albemarle County would not be taking advantage of that. These are really successful students at the education school, the Curry School of Education at UVA, who are teaching this enrichment program, and we don't take advantage of it.

I think part of that is communication. I don't think necessarily the districts talk to each other as well as they could. I know there could be better communication between the city and the county. The fact that, the city and the county, their offices are like three-quarters of a mile away from each other, I don't think they get together all that often to do anything. As a school board member, I'd like to think that I would have the opportunity to meet the school board from Charlottesville, and have some meetings about what we could do differently, what we could do together. [The Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center] is a success story. I don't think we should be limited by that.

**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 support the strategic plan. I think it's great. CATEC is awesome, and it's filling a gap that a lot of communities don't fill. When the economy took a turn in 2009, state funding went away, it really did, and we're still not caught up to where we were. A lot of our surrounding communities cut their equivalent of CATEC, and to me that's a huge mistake because it fills a need in the community, and not just for our students, but for our society as a whole. There are opportunities to give people the chance to get a job. And especially when the economy is bad, that's not the time to cut that funding, it's the time to invest in it. I would need to see the numbers with regard to Piedmont. I don't to build things for the sake of building things. I think sometimes infrastructure is not the best idea. That being said, I think there's a natural benefit to CAEC and PVCC being in the same area. That makes a lot of sense, but I'd want to make sure that we're not spending money simply for the sake of spending money.

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

Yes. My daughter has not taken a foreign language yet. She's in sixth grade, and she's not going to take it until the second semester of her sixth grade year. We talked about catching up, when you get behind you can't catch up, the reality is the best time to learn a language is when you're five and six years old, because of the way your brain is morphed, you're more receptive to those words. In other communities around the country students are learning Spanish, French, German, and quite frankly, the way the economy is, I think we should start teaching this, Mandarin Chinese, at kindergarten. And the fact that we're not doing this in all of our schools is a mistake, and I think we need to move to address that.

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

I think we had this tendency in 2009 to cut. Our expenses per pupil have gone down, and I know the public doesn't know that, and I know it doesn't seem like that because our local taxes keep going up. There's a gut reaction, a visceral reaction, which I understand, which is 'Wait a minute, we're spending more and more on education, how come the school system keeps saying that we need more money.'

But the reality is that state and federal funding keeps going down, and it's going down faster than the local expenses are going up. And so we need to make sure that the state and the federal government are meeting the mandates that they put forth. They have all these mandates that they say they'll pay for, and then they don't pay for them. The political touch word is 'unfunded mandates,' but the reality is that it's true. We have a lot of things that we're required to do—paperwork, technology work—that the state is imposing upon us to do, but they're not paying for them. So we're taking money from our classrooms, we're taking money from our educators and students, and we're putting forth pet projects of bureaucrats in Richmond and Washington, DC, and we're not making up for that funding anywhere else.

I want to make sure that our per pupil spending is where it needs to be, and quite frankly I don't think it is. And I want the money that we're spending to actually go towards education and not towards things that our community doesn't want. I think it takes a certain amount of courage to say 'Look, the state government wants us to do this, but they're not paying for it, so we're not going to do that thing. We're going to take this \$50,000 that the state says we have to pay over here, and we're going to use it the way we need to use it: for pre-K, for world languages, to make sure that our schools are competitive.' It takes courage to do that, but I like to think that I'm willing to take the heat. And I'd like to put pressure on our local delegates, our local senator to say 'Look, you need to provide the funding that is guaranteed by our constitution. The Virginia Constitution says 'a great public school for every student.'" We need to hold them to that, because right now they're not pulling their weight, and what that does, is that simply puts more pressure on the homeowners in Albemarle County, and that's a mistake.