



2015 Albemarle County School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Jason Buyaki (I)

On November 3, 2015, voters in the Rivanna Magisterial District go to the polls to elect their representative on the Albemarle County School Board. This recording is Brian Wheeler's August 27, 2015 interview with Jason Buyaki (I). Buyaki 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/

INTERVIEW

Mr. Buyaki, 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 a parent, a taxpayer and I am engaged in civic life within the county. I am a U.S. citizen and I have met all the qualifications to be on the ballot according to the electoral board. I have served my community in a variety of ways. I have served on Parent Council with the Stony Point PTO and actually you were on the board at that time. I came in simply as an observer to learn quite a bit more about our school division mostly because I thought if I am going to do Parent Council work, I wanted to have a greater understanding of all the challenges and issues that our school division faces. For me that was a way of serving my community and providing them with as much feedback as possible and I also currently serve on the School Board so I would like to continue to do my work there.

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

I think I have two top priorities. The first one, the most challenging one for me, is I think our academies are doing really well, but the problem with our academies is getting students to those academies. I continue to try to find a way to either centralize the location for the academies so all students can attend – and that central location would have core curriculum provided at that location as well – or we need to find a transportation method that allows students to really get to those academies. Right now we are filled up, and we have waiting lists. That's good. That means kids are showing that they are really interested in those topics. The best thing we can do is open up the doors and get as many kids to those programs as are willing to participate.

My other top priority is something that's kind of boiled for a little while with the school board, that is getting kids into real world examples of work place experiences through either internships or job shadowing interviews. Being able to explore a future career before you actually go off and do it I think is really important. That gives students the opportunity to put their foot in the water, so to speak, and to find out if that's something they would like to continue to pursue. And they may find out that they still love it afterwards, or no that's not quite what they were thinking and then they haven't gone down the college career path of taking a wide variety of courses, spending a fortune going to college, and then finding out that's not what they want to do for the rest of their life. So I think that real life experience in the workplace is essential.

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?

Well there are a couple of challenges with that question, because as a School Board member, our charter is really dictated by the Commonwealth and that is that we are to provide education for K-12 and not pre-K. But pre-K programs have quite a bit of

value to the community and the students that attend it. There is a high value to be placed on young children spending as much time with their parents as possible. I think that really can provide them with a lot of preschool guidance that they need when they grow up.

The challenge for us of course for us as Albemarle County is do we have the space to put the students in to? We are using some of our space and what we are finding is that we are running up against capacity issues, the challenge being that we are a growing county and the enrollment continues to grow so space is becoming a premium. Childcare, it's not a function of government to provide childcare. Can we find community options that might work well? I think down at Yancey [Elementary] we have done some of that work where we have created small programs where students can stay behind after school with some childcare and some enrichment. Those multifaceted approaches, not just relying on the school division, but bringing in community support, churches, and so forth, that's the way to really approach that. Simply not putting the burden wholly on the schools or wholly on local government, but finding real community approaches.

So would I make it a priority, no. But is it on my radar, yes. And solving that problem is I think going to continue to be one of the great challenges that we are going to have as a county.

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 adds to the experience of students. Technology can't replace teachers. Teachers have vast experience, that human interaction that technology simply can't grant them. I think one of the challenges that we face is figuring out how to use technology wisely and use it to deliver access to content for students. We can use technology to replace text books if we wish, or have it as an additional curriculum content. One of the thoughts I have always been intrigued with was the idea that if you had one teacher...teaching Chinese in the county and if she was only at one school then only those students could benefit. And I think the solution is to try to do an online course that allows students from other schools to be able to participate in those classes. That broadens that reach out of the content that she can deliver to students.

So it is a challenging topic to figure out the best way to do that. Computers can't replace teachers, we know that. But we can use computers to add to the experience that students receive, and we are a technological society [thus] to deny students the use of computers and go with traditional methods of education I don't agree with that methodology. I don't think anyone wants to go back to the old way of preparing students for the workforce. But it is a mix between the two. You have got to get out there and use technology wisely, add it to content, so it's a mix.

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

I think we are. We generally get reports from our HR department a few times a year. At our last meeting we actually had a report that we had about 1,000 teachers apply to about 120 vacancies I think. So the candidate pool is really wide and it's good to be able to have a large candidate pool to draw from. And I think when you have such a large pool you can certainly, once you process through all those folks, you can certainly try and get the best teachers.

The county has set a payment salary based upon being in the lower part of the top 25 percent of [peer] counties within the Commonwealth of Virginia. So we are consistently in that band and I think that keeps us competitive. We offer a very, very robust and generous health care and dental plans as well.

We measure our teachers' performance by continuous walk throughs with central office staff, the principals, they are constantly out checking and monitoring our teachers and [looking at] end of the year assessments. Not just SOLs, that's only one measure of performance, but we see that with our students our on time graduation rates continue to increase every year – I want to say we are at 93-94 percent which is very high. And in terms of state testing, we generally come in at 4-5 percent higher than the Commonwealth of Virginia and national standards. Our graduates are going off into many different fields, a wide variety of colleges and I think that's really good. Our dropout rate is really low. When I combine all those, I think I can make the case that our teacher performance is really good.

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

I don't have the answer why we have persistent achievement gaps. I think whenever somebody figures that out then I think we solve that problem. I think we as a community just have to continue to work hard and get involved with all students. Part of the relationship between teacher and student is a primary driver for allowing students to reach their fullest potential.

One of the things that is very effective for Albemarle County, and specifically Jack Jouett [Middle School] is they have the AVID program, which is Advancement Via Individual Determination. That program puts the emphasis on the student. It kind of lays out the pathway for the student and the student has to overcome the challenge and rise to the top and the students that go through that program, if you hear them speak about the challenges that they face and what they did to overcome it, you know that they are doing really well. All of these students have different backgrounds, socioeconomic, and so it's not one particular segment that suffers from the achievement gap. But every time I hear about the AVID program, that's a program that I want to have in every single school because that allows students to become the driver of their future and that gets lost a lot of times in the discussion.

You know kids go to school and you are not speaking to students about how what you do here sets you on your pathway to the future and instilling in them to follow their dream whatever that dream is and having that discussion with them. I think that's really important. I always tell my children to work hard at school because it is going to get you prepared for your future, and that's your primary job right now, just to work hard, master your material, and do the best job you can.

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.

This is going back to the second question on priorities and our academy programs. I think they would really benefit from the city, UVA, county relationship. There's a wealth of knowledge at each one of these organizations and being able to bring them together, centrally located, that ties all that together. Being able to provide extensive services at one location -- bringing in instructors from UVA, professors that have experience for example in the medical field, bringing those folks in -- if we could get that around to having some discussions about that I think that would be a pretty robust program and one that opens the doors for potentially more students. Obviously space is the issue and location, those are the challenges to be met and I think once we figure those out then I think we could have a really robust academy program serving Charlottesville and Albemarle County.

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, but I am not prepared to build a new facility for CATEC. The challenge for CATEC is getting enough students into their programs. We have revamped a lot of the programming this year, and I think once we start building those programs and making it -- you know the challenge is to not think of it in terms of this is where the other students go, this is where students go that are already focused on a specific career path, technical education, and the wide variety of jobs that that entails -- once we get enough student enrollment into that then I think we can make the case for building a new facility, but at the current time I don't think we can.

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

I have not in the past made the expansion of world languages a priority because we have so many other priorities that we need to continue to support. Expanding world languages I think is a good thing, my concern has always been I don't want it to be a single language focus. I want to have multiple languages available to students. Simply choosing one language and calling that a World Languages program is a falsehood and that's what we are doing right now. We have a world LANGUAGE program, but let's expand it to some other languages. If we expand it to other languages I think I could come around to supporting it, but the challenge is we've got a tight budget. We've always had a tight budget and trying to figure out which

priority to support is always the challenge, but right now I don't support that as a number one priority.

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

Well I don't know if I can even boil it down to one Brian. There's many areas that I am always concerned about. It's been one of my things since I've been on the school board to always take a look at the line item budget. Years ago when I first did that we were allocating money in specific categories and then not spending it and spending it in different categories. So I spoke about that with my colleagues and members of central office and I said we need to put the money where we are going to spend it, that's just truth in advertising. So over time there has been a shift, and the money is now for the most part being distributed to the correct categories.

But I think one of the areas I am most concerned about on the school budget is professional development. That has always been short-changed quite a bit every year and we always come back and we never put as much money in that area as we wish. That's important because professional development gives teachers new skills, new ways of teaching content and I've got some new things lined up that I've heard from some principals about different ways of approaching professional development that doesn't necessarily send our staff out of town to conferences. So I am kind of keen on seeing how that develops this fall because that can really be a game changer for professional development and allow us to integrate our services a little better and maximize the use of our taxpayer money.