



## **2015 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview**

*Candidate: Sherry Kraft (I)*

On November 3, 2015, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to four seats on the Charlottesville School Board. This recording is Brian Wheeler's August 31, 2015 interview with Sherry Kraft (I). Other candidates in this race include: Adam Hastings (I); incumbent Amy Laufer (I); and incumbent Jennifer McKeever (I).

*The audio recording of this interview and complete election coverage is available on Charlottesville Tomorrow's website: <http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/cityvote>*

### **INTERVIEW**

**Ms. Kraft, 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 Charlottesville 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 Charlottesville School Board.**

Well thank you, Brian. I have many years, I'd say 30 plus years in the community as a clinical psychologist working with kids and families. And I've worked with kids who do well in school, and I've worked with kids who don't do well in school for a variety of reasons. I've worked with the other agencies who try to intervene and support these kids. And so I think that I've learned a lot about the schools from that vantage point, sometimes about what doesn't work, and sometimes what can make a difference to a kid who is really struggling. I also think from my training and experience I've also learned a lot about working collaboratively, and I really value that. I think it's very important. So I like to find solutions and work in a very civil and respectful way, and I think I'm pretty good at calling people out if that doesn't happen.

I also have experience as a parent. My kids are through the system and out. They have survived. Both of them. And I think that's helpful because, as many people probably, I get anxious about my own kids and focus intently on what they're doing, and I have a little bit of a different perspective now. And so I think that's helpful as well. I've also worked on a lot of boards in leadership positions, and boards in the community, so I think I can do a good job working on a board.

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

Well, four years goes by quickly, and the way I would answer that, I would probably answer that in terms of bookends for the system. One bookend being pre-K and early childhood programs and I think continuing to work on those programs. I think we have some good classrooms in place. Well, you know I think we do a fairly good job at that, but I think that it needs expansion. It needs to also be integrated more to services to families. And so what I'd like to see is that for the population that tends to fall behind in the Charlottesville school system, we work on the inputs for that population and I think we need two years, two good years to work on that. So age three to kindergarten. I'd like to see us make progress toward that, and it's complicated, but I'd really like to see us move toward that.

On the other end, I find it really important to deal with what happens when kids graduate, and for that I'm very much interested in developing [the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center], and CATEC's sort of integrated model of workforce development for these kids, who, you know, are not going to go on to colleges. We have an interesting distribution in Charlottesville schools. At one end we have this very high achieving group who get swept up and they go to some really good schools, and that's what they're going to do next. But we have an awful lot of kids who aren't going to do that and they, I think the age span starting from about 18 and spanning until 24-year-old I think is a very high risk time for many young adults. And I like to see us continue to push in the direction that I think CATEC is starting to go in.

**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?**

Yes, I will. I think it's very important as I said. I would really like to take a look at where we can go in terms of the population that we have who need these extra inputs, and you know, what our end goal is. You know the three-year-old program, that ends at like 1:45 in the afternoon, and I actually don't know what happens to these kids then, but that seems like something that we need to change for that to be effective. How I'm going to do it, I can't really answer that. You ask a lot of questions, I have a lot to learn now. I have to meet with people and find out what's going on, what's working, what people are thinking about, and then from there I think to see how we move incrementally toward that goal.

**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.**

That's a good question, and I guess I would say, gosh, what's the point of the technology? What is the purpose of it? What are the goals? And I would say, first off, that technology should never replace a relationship with a teacher, and relationship-based learning. For about 98 percent of kids, there are a few kids who can't do that. My nephew being one of them. He got kicked out of two high schools before he was accepted in a program that allowed him to go to school, but work on a computer the entire day, and that's what worked for him. That would not work for most students and I hope we never get to that point. So obviously the goals should be to provide them with information they need in order to do well in school and skills that they need to navigate the world. And I can imagine a lot of their teachers are not as good as even they are at doing this, so partnering with other entities like UVa, like [the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center], maybe even using more graduate students in the schools to work on some of these things. I think we just need to look for ways other than blaming the teachers for not being adequate enough in this area.

**5. 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 really do support the plan. I have been very excited to read about this. CATEC needs a new infusion, and there's such a place for it in the community. I think it's so valuable and could be a hub of transitioning for a lot of these kids, who need to have employable, marketable skills when they leave high school. And they may need to go on to Piedmont, and they may need to go on with their education, but these things need to be done seamlessly, and I think everyone is kind of beginning to

coalesce around this idea that we really need to do this, and I think it requires a whole village to pull this off.

I think the business community really needs to be involved. Certainly PVCC needs to be involved. The high schools need to be involved, and UVa, that is right here and needs to be involved. I think there's a lot of opportunity here, so I'm very excited about it.

As far as the facility, I don't know how to answer that, because I don't know enough about the current facility to know in what ways is it not adequate. And the important thing is that it needs to be accessible.

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

Well, I would say that is going to be a question that I will ask, and so I probably can't answer that question in its entirety because I don't know, but it's about maybe, what kind of question do you ask in order to understand that better. For example, what kind of teachers of what populations of students? One type of teacher who is good for one population may not be good for another within the school system. So you know I think we need to look at that. I don't know if we're measuring their performance adequately and I want to know that. I hope we are, but I hope we're not being too rigid in how we do that. That we can be creative and flexible in how we assess performance, and how we assess whether they are a good teacher or not. Do we pay them enough? Probably not, and I would say not. And I think that's true not only in Charlottesville, but I think it's an entire cultural shift that we need to make.

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

Single handedly? [laughs] Okay, first of all I think kids enter our system and go through our system with vastly different inputs. Not just whether they were read to at home, but all of the inputs from their environment, from their families, from other elements in the community, the values, there's a lot of things. I think there's a lot to that. And so it's not at all surprising that there would be differences in achievement.

I've thought a lot about this, and one issue is to find out what is actually going on in Charlottesville. Are we doing better? Are we doing something right? And looking at the most recent data, which I brought with me, I think there are some things that we're doing right and I want to find out more about what they are. But our scores for our African-American kids in third grade have gone up dramatically. It's very interesting from two years ago to last year when these data came out. The scores for the Hispanic students have gone up unbelievably. And so what is going on there? Looking at the third grade, I want to find out more about what they're doing. Something is going right and I want to find out more about it.

Eighth grade, there are also gains in all of those groups. The white students tend to do well and they're pretty stable. Eighth grade is not as dramatic, but they're still

gaining. The African-American students gained 10 percentage points in terms of their passing the SOL in reading. In fifth grade, and I don't have that with me, but in fifth grade I think it's a little more questionable. So I'm wondering what's going on from third grade to fifth grade, and then fifth grade to eighth grade. I sort of feel like a CSI investigator. I want to find out what's happening before I could say 'Here's what I would do.' I wouldn't be so presumptuous as to say "I will close the achievement gap.' But if there are points of strength, then let's build on what those are, let's look at them. If there are points of weakness and patterns in this, then let's try to find out what those are, and improve in those areas.

**8. 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.**

The first one that comes to mind is related to [the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center], and is related to employability of students who are graduating, getting their GEDs or going out into the world, and needing to make a decent living, and needing to avoid getting in trouble in the ways that some of them do get in trouble and end up in wherever they end up, and they end up turning to drugs or other things. So to me this is an area that lots of the parts of the community can come around. Another that comes to mind is science education, and I think we are doing some things with UVA that are exciting. I'd like to see those continue and maybe expand further and maybe even expand down into the lower grades more. I guess those would be two areas that would come to mind, but I think there probably are ten more.

**9. GRADE RECONFIGURATION: 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?**

I am open to that, reconfiguration, and I think in part it connects back to the pre-K issue of, you know where are we going to have a more comprehensive program, and of course Walker school is one possibility that people look at, so I think we have to be open to this, but I also think it's really complicated because I think we're going to have some space issues in our schools.

We have some really interesting trends, especially in the lower grades in Charlottesville. We have kindergarten increasing by, I wrote it down, what is it 37 percent, 37.8 percent from 2011 to 2014, and we have kindergarten through fourth increasing by 16.7 percent during the same time so why is this happening, is it that we have a demographic where more younger families are starting to want to live closer in? Is it something that has to do with our school system that people are looking at and liking what they see? But if this is continuing, I don't know where we put all the kids, so that's going to be something that we're going to have to talk about soon, because I think some of these other goals may depend a lot, I mean of course you have to house the students that you have, right? You have to house them in a reasonable learning environment. In the best of all worlds we would do that.

We would have a great three-year-old and four-year-old program, and then you know, I think we look at making Buford the middle school for the city. The other issue, I guess, that is a concern I have, is that I don't want to lose the arts education, the music in particular. I think that is such a keynote of our system. I just don't want to be losing that in this reconfiguration, so we have to figure those things out.

**10. BUDGET / BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION FOR SCHOOL FUNDING: What steps should Council and the School Board take to help build a more sustainable school budget?**

Great question. I think that has to be worked on, from my vantage point, and I haven't been in on those meetings, but it seems to me that the questions, the goals need to be laid out farther in advance, and I think in a way that both Council and the School Board are working on the same team. And it hasn't always worked like that, it hasn't always looked like that, and so they get caught up in a process that maybe doesn't serve the school system for sure. So I would say starting farther in advance, and really identifying needs and goals, and then beginning to put dollar figures by them. And then informing the community and educating the community about this.

Again I think that hasn't always been done in a way that we all understand our school system is at the heart and soul of our community. There is nothing more important than having a thriving school system, than having the diversity of populations that are in our city, which is a great asset, it's wonderful. It's our obligation to serve them in the best way that we can. Charlottesville prides itself on being this great, wonderful city. You know, happy and thriving in many ways, but I think that the school system is perhaps the most important measure of that. And I think helping everyone understand that in the community because I think that is really important and I would love to help with that.