



2015 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Jennifer McKeever (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 September 1, 2015 interview with incumbent Jennifer McKeever (I). Other candidates in this race include: Adam Hastings (I); Sherry Kraft (I); and incumbent Amy Laufer (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. McKeever, 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.

I have been fortunate to be on the School Board for the last four years, so I feel that that does qualify me to be on the School Board. In addition, I have four children, two of which are currently in the school system—one at Walker and one at Buford, one who is in preschool and one who is just 20 months—and I'm a lawyer and have been committed to service in this community since we moved back here in 2005.

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

I continue to remain focused on increasing the reading levels for our neediest children, and the math literacy for our neediest children. That's the highest priority in my mind.

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?

I will certainly make pre-K education a priority. It has been a priority, particularly for the division for many years. I feel like the city's investment in the three-year-old program and the four-year-old program is very significant. So significant that we don't have a waiting list for the four-year-olds, and I'm very proud of that. I would love to see it expand to the three-year-olds as well. I think the preschool teachers we have are very strong. I very much appreciate the evaluation that we use to evaluate our preschool teachers, I think there is very high standards and expectations for our teachers. The children are nurtured and developed appropriately at the preschool level, so to continue you that and add classrooms at the appropriate level is certainly a high priority. And I think about question number nine about reconfiguration, I'll more into depth about that.

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.

I believe that we have rolled out a very good device with our Chromebooks in the city school system. I'm excited about that and I think our director of technology has done a really good job of folding in teachers and division leaders to get buy in around this particular device, and the training needed to support the teachers and the children in the classroom, so I'm very excited about the integration of technology, and the appropriate level of integration of technology into our classrooms. And all of our teachers are constantly learning, and technology is not the end-all be-all. I certainly don't want to see our teachers, especially before high school, being

replaced by computers. That's not the direction that I want to see our division go, because relationships are so important to getting children to the next level. It's a tool, it's a useful tool, but I cannot be the only tool for our students.

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'm so grateful to that strategic plan. I think it's a useful tool to look to the future, and to use the resources that we've put into CATEC to build the next generation of CATEC leaders and graduates. Should CATEC build a facility at Piedmont? That's going to be up to the Piedmont Board, and of course we'll have a vote on it. There are a lot of variables that I still need the answer to. I really appreciate and want to support the idea, because I love the idea of CATEC being next to a community college. There's just a lot of synergy there that can be used, but I also know that there are a lot of issues, particularly around money, and about transportation, and I don't want to commit to something that I don't fully understand yet.

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

I actually have a little note here that say we're not measuring performance effectively. I, how do we know? We get a report every year, and it say how many things we would expect it to say: that we are doing a good job recruiting, that we are, based on surrounding counties, that our teachers are making a very good salary comparatively, and of course I want to keep that up. I find that what's most important is are we retaining our most effective teachers? Recruiting is good, you certainly want to be bringing in new people to the system who have great ideas and who are bring the energy, but it's very important for me that we retain those teachers, and in order to do that we need to make sure that we're measuring them effectively and supporting them effectively in the classroom. I think we've done some great things with [instructional coaching] and new ways of doing professional development. At the same time, could we be doing better? Yes. I would like to be doing better.

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

This is not an excuse, I think we reflect our community. That's all there is to it. We reflect our community. Now that doesn't mean that we shouldn't, that means that we need to be striving to overcome the barriers that our students encounter all the time, and I feel like we try. And how we define what is the achievement gap is an issue, because what you see with the SOLs, for example, is all groups improving, so the achievement gap persists. So I prefer to look at reading and math literacy as areas of focus, that's how I want to bring all of our children to levels that they can graduate, and not just be defined by SOLs or some arbitrary number. If they are enjoying reading, and are able to do math and are enjoying using computers, and we can define that analysis, and certainly the state does by using the SOLs, but those gaps are persisting, and the one thing I would do continue to close the gap is support

additional coaching in our schools to support teachers to constantly be digging into our own biases, and to make sure that we're at appropriate discipline for all of our children. That is the direction that I would like to see our focus on the achievement gap go.

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.

I am delighted with some of the cooperation that we already have, with our science labs, the Buford and UVA partnership is great. And the summer science program that I believe we have and the county is also involved in, these are just great models in learning and I hope we can all benefit from those experiences we're having with that. I continue to see functional skills, ESOL and other areas we can continue to partner and continue to do better with. I also think professional development, we already partner with the University, but just continuing to strengthen those relationships with the reading in particular, and the math. I think we have some interesting program and I just want to build and strengthen.

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?

For four years I've been asking questions about reconfiguration, because mostly I was very skeptical coming in as a school board member, skeptical because it was a very tight divide, it was about 49 to 51 percent in favor of configuration in the community, so it's a very divisive issue, so I'm really, I'm hesitant to commit to say that this is what we should do. Which is a problem because it makes it difficult for City Council to say 'Yes we shouldn't fund it if our school board is divided on it, and our community is divided on it.'

One way that I have tried to have a vision for the reconfiguration is really at the preschool level. And what I see at the preschool level is having one central location for all of our preschool classes, but also inviting private schools to come in and have classrooms in that building as well. To leverage funding, to leverage the public private partnership so we can have a more diverse preschool experience for our students, and so there's incentive for private preschool to have diversity in their classroom. That's one of the things I see as the mom of a preschooler, that there lacks a diversity in the private preschools, and I would love to incorporate, that right at the beginning we're all together, and have one central school, with private and public funding, to house multiple preschools, and multiple modalities as well. So you have a Waldorf classroom, you have a Montessori classroom. You have all different kinds of preschools, that none are better than the other, but that they all have high expectations for their children and that they all get to X point before they go to kindergarten.

Now, with respect to the middle school, and I get this just as a parent looking at the numbers, from the transition years, from fourth to fifth, from sixth to seventh and eighth to ninth are years that set our children back academically.

Now, why? They do much better the second year that they're in the school, but the first year really is such a new experience for them that they really are set back, and I think it would good for our children to have one transition rather than have the multiple transitions. So I support in theory the sixth through eight concept, but there are a lot of questions. For example, our schools continue to grow, so even if you take the preschool classrooms out, you still don't necessarily have enough room for the fifth grades, so there are a lot of unanswered questions, and that all leads to a lot of money.

I think that the buildings need to be improved. We have made some investments at the high school and at Buford. I think limiting the transitions is important, but at what cost? There is a limit, and our community has been so supportive of education, and it really does make a difference that our community supports us and supports the investment we make in our students, but we cannot just continue to go to the well all the time. So I'm optimistic that maybe at the end of my next term there will be a plan. And I think that's the most important thing, that we are working with City Council to say 'This is what we want,' and they are buying-in, and we can get a plan together with the City Council, that we can then go to the community and ask them to support, that I think is incremental, because I just don't know if a one-time \$50 million investment, that is not the way to go. I don't think I want to do that to our community.

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?

I think the School Board needs to take a very active role of being a budget hawk over the school's budget, and ensuring that City Council understands the ways that we are looking at the budget and the vision we have for the division. I leave it up to City Council to find the ways to do it. Obviously for decades it worked to have a split of new revenue coming in. The last four or five years that has not been very effective because the new revenues have been so limited.

So I do think that the city taxpayers support the schools, and I would like to see the School Board have to work within the budget that we have, and knowing what new revenue we're getting. And the, if we're working alongside the budget process, helping to get City Council to understand the initiatives we're trying to invest in, and that way the whole community gets buy-in, and not just the seven elected officials on the School Board. But the City Council and the whole community understands that 'Okay, we're doing Spanish now, that's why they want an increase,' instead of 'Oh, well they all want an increase all the time.' No, all of these initiatives cost money, and if the community wants those programs at the schools, then hopefully City Council and the community is behind it and the School Board will support it, but I do think that we have a long way to go on that. And I'm not sure. We do meet every

other month, typically. Sometimes those go by the wayside, those meetings, and continuing those relationships so that they understand what we're trying to do, and we understand the constraints that they're under.