

Fairfax County NAACP School Board Candidate Questionnaire

Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) remains one of the best school districts in the state and the country. Nevertheless, it faces many challenges, one of which is the need to adjust policies, practices, and budgets to reflect its rapidly changing demographics. In order to provide the Fairfax County NAACP membership and supporters with a better idea of how you would approach these challenges, we ask that you complete the following questionnaire by 14 July. Thank you and best of luck.

1. What do you see as the primary challenge to accommodating the demographic changes in FCPS?

I believe that the staff and faculty have a commitment to serving all of the members of the FCPS community. We have students from a myriad of ethnic, economic, and educational backgrounds that cover the full spectrum of physical, intellectual, and emotional abilities. The teachers I have had the honor of working with here in Fairfax County have all shared a firm commitment to helping all of those students reach their full potential. The biggest challenge they have faced is operating within the restrictions of budgets and class sizes. Our teachers have the creativity to build curriculums that serve these students but they need the resources to make these programs available to all.

1. What measures would you advocate for to close the minority student achievement gap.

In my experience, many students performing under their potential respond positively to before and after school opportunities to study, participate in extended curriculum, and get more one-on-one time with their teachers. Questions they may not feel comfortable asking in the traditional classroom setting seem to come more easily to them during small study groups. I would advocate for more programs that offer students the opportunity to interact with instructors in low pressure settings and that focus on extending the curriculum, especially in the area of concrete application.

1. A recent George Mason University study demonstrated that FCPS has been systematically discriminating against black teachers for several years. Fairfax NAACP believes that among other measures, FCPS should invite an outside firm to oversee its hiring and retention policies and practices. Would you support that effort?

I would specifically like to see FCPS overhaul its entire hiring and HR apparatus. Having worked as a FCPS teacher, my personal experience of the process was not positive. There is a great deal of room for improvement. I would support retaining the help of an outside firm to this end.

1. Fairfax NAACP supports changing the name of J.E.B Stuart High School because he was a traitor and fought and died for the Confederacy, whose values included white supremacy and slavery. Do you support this effort?

Yes, I support changing the name of J.E.B. Stuart High School—but I do not believe FCPS should take the funds for that change from its operating budget. I would strongly support a community led effort to raise these funds and to help choose a new name for the school. Unfortunately, FCPS has limited resources and will likely have even more limited resources in the future.

1. FCPS has repeatedly failed to make the budget adjustments needed to adequately fund Pre-K programs such as FECEP and Head Start. As result, there is a 3-4 year long waiting list for pre-K, which contributes to the minority student achievement gap. Will you commit to reducing the pre-K waiting list from 3-4 years to 1 year by 2019, and ultimately eliminate the waiting list by 2020?

I absolutely believe Pre-K should be available to all children in our community and should be a priority during budget planning.

1. The existing standing FCSB Stakeholder groups do not reflect the community’s diversity with respect to ethnicity, race, sex, or disabilities. Will you support adjusting the composition of these groups to make them more inclusive?

As a PTA board member for many years one of my personal goals has been to increase parent engagement with the PTA and with their children’s education. Many members of our community hesitate to step up to volunteer because they are often made all too aware of their differences. But the members of our community do come from different places, speak different languages, wear different clothing, etc. And encouraging them to step up into leadership positions makes FCPS a better place. It is easy, when forming these types of groups, to accept the same voices over and over again. It takes effort to reach out to other groups and foster their confidence—but it is an investment well worth making. Their contributions are essential to the success of our community.

1. Many students have reported to us that the atmosphere in their schools has become increasingly toxic because of racially- and religiously-charged bullying; and in many cases teachers have offered little support. How will you address this issue?

Yes, there are teachers in FCPS that need training on how to identify and confront bullying in the classroom and beyond. Many teachers have adopted a “let them work it out” attitude that I do not believe is acceptable. Racial, religious, gender, and sexual harassment are detrimental to a constructive learning environment. I believe that schools must be a safe place for our children in order for them to function. Beyond that, schools represent a microcosm of our community. Just as many people have now realized they must be allies and stand up for those they see being harassed in public, we have to teach our children to stand up for themselves and others. This behavior begins with modeling. When teachers ignore bullying, they’re sending the absolute wrong message to their students. Just as there are now courses teaching adults how to be allies in the community, our schools need to provide instruction to both teachers and students in the right way to confront harassment, bullying, and discrimination in our schools.

1. Students have reported to us that their curriculum largely ignores black history, except for brief references to the most prominent civil rights leaders and a watered-down explanation of slavery. Will you support changes to the curriculum to be provide a more holistic depiction of American history that reflects the accomplishments and contributions of all races?

I have a degree in History from Johns Hopkins and did my Master’s work in American Studies at UVa. I also have a Master’s in Education from Marymount. I believe the curriculum should live and breathe and evolve as our understanding and relationship with the past does. Even in just the last decade, we as a people have made real progress in understanding the evolution of our society and the issues that bring us together—and often tear us apart. I believe it is possible to build a curriculum around our shared history in a way that lets each voice speak and tell its own story yet still provide a cohesive framework for students to understand how the pieces overlap and fit together.