

Coalition for DC Public Schools and Communities

C4DC is a group of organizations representing every ward in the District, who have

come together to advocate so children in all corners of our city have strong

DCPS public schools in their neighborhoods as well as choices – from Pre-K through

high school – that fully meet the needs of our students and our communities.



Please return to this survey to c4dcpublicschools@gmail.com by October 5th

Candidate's Name: Emily Gasoi

Ward: 1

1. Why are you running for this office?

I am running to represent Ward 1 on the SBOE to bring the voices of those closest to the classroom--teachers, families, and students--to decision making. Others can talk the rhetoric of "equity" but I know what it takes to make it happen from a classroom perspective. Of the nine school board members, only one has children in DC schools and classroom teaching experience and she is stepping down. I am the only candidate running from Ward 1 who brings that parent and teacher perspective. The primary role of the board is to represent constituents with an understanding of how policies will play out on the ground. I have a daughter in the DC system, I have taught children and adults, I have spent my professional life researching, writing about, and

advocating empowering teachers and parents, and for strong public schools.

Further, I am motivated to run for the SBOE because I see that we have not made enough progress toward the promises made 11 years ago -- that we move toward a more equitable school system. In fact, the test-score gap between marginalized students and their more privileged peers has only grown. With some exceptions, our schools are as segregated as ever. Resources are still not equitably or adequately distributed. And our top-down system lacks meaningful checks and balances. I feel motivated to run for SBOE to work with others on the Board who are trying to address these problems and need allies in the fight for a more equitable, transparent, and democratic school system.

2. How will you engage your constituents, parents, teachers, students and the community?

I began engaging DC teachers long before my decision to run for the DC SBOE. I co-founded two teacher empowerment groups, the Washington Teachers Inquiry Group and DC Soup. Through my candidacy, I have engaged parents, students, and community members in listening sessions and will continue to do so once I'm elected to represent Ward 1 on the school board. As the only democratically elected body related to education in our system, I think it's an imperative that the DC SBOE do more to actively seek out stakeholder input, especially from those who are less likely to sign up to be on a task force or come to testify.

3. What qualifications do you bring to the office of State Board of Education, including your professional or personal experience with public education in our city?

- Education is my life's work. I began as a classroom teacher for seven years beginning in 1997 and I have devoted my career to creating more equitable and democratic school communities.

- I am a parent with a first grader in our school system -- I understand that a "choice" system of winners and losers is no solution because I've navigated that system. I've concluded that we need quality neighborhood schools, not just "choice."

- In DC I worked for six years with Center for Inspired Teaching as a course instructor and mentor for new teachers in schools across the city.
- I co-founded Washington Teachers Inquiry Group and DC Soup, two teacher empowerment groups that provided support for educators.
- In 2015, I Co-founded Artful Education which has helped to create partnerships between arts organizations and DCPS and to strengthen arts teaching and learning in our schools and afterschool programs.
- I teach an internship-based Education Advocacy course in the department of Education, Inquiry, and Justice at Georgetown University; students do semester-long research internship with DC education advocacy organizations, such as Words Beats and Life, and the School Justice Project, as well as with individual teacher activists, among others, to learn about how to work for educational justice through different methods of advocacy.
- I recently co-authored the book, “These Schools Belong to You and Me: Why We Can’t Afford to Abandon our Public Schools,” with renowned educator, Deborah Meier.

4. Under Mayoral Control of education, in effect since 2007, the State Board of Education has very limited authority over policy. Do you believe their authority should be expanded? **Yes**
No _____

If Yes, in what areas?

I have a concern that there is in general insufficient accountability and oversight over the actions of the State Superintendent and over both the DCPS Chancellor and the PCSB. All three are appointed by and are in some ways accountable only to the mayor. So we have a single individual who is able to control all accountability and oversight. And that individual has a primarily political motivation. For the SBOE to have more authority would improve accountability and oversight. On a practical level, I have learned that the State Board currently has virtually no staff. This needs to change if it is expected to have any more authority.

I'd like to see the state board have more authority in promoting independent research on what's working and what isn't. The State

Board needs to be able to initiate work, conduct investigations, and pursue lines of questioning on behalf of their constituents on any subjects of concern. The notion that there are only narrow lanes within which SBOE members have a right to be concerned needs to be challenged.

5. Should charter schools be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the open meetings laws for boards of directors?

Yes No_____ Please explain your answer.

In addition to being subject to FOIA, I also believe that the SBOE needs to have the authority to require that certain kinds of data be kept and made public. For example, DCPS currently doesn't keep data about teacher turnover or the race and ethnicity of their teaching workforce. Charter schools do not have to reveal anything about the work of management firms schools hire or what they are paid. So it's not just what's subject to FOIA, but also what data is routinely kept and made public.

6. In 2016 the State Board of Education made important recommendations for how schools in the District of Columbia should be judged as succeeding or not, consistent with the Federal ESSA (Every Child Succeeds Act). They included putting in place a star rating for each school - 1 to 5 stars. Do you believe the metrics proposed for that rating system capture school quality?

Yes No_____ Please explain your answer.

I attended several of the public forums the SBOE sponsored throughout the city. I thought the recommendations the SBOE developed were excellent and accurately represented concerns I heard constituents express during these forums. But in the end, there were not sufficient members of the SBOE who stood by those recommendations and so the current criteria were passed. I want to be a member on the board who prioritizes representing constituent voice over rubber stamping policies that the mayor prefers.

I predict the 5-star rating will do great damage to low-income schools. I think it's a bad idea and should at least have been field-tested. It pretends to be a rating of schools overall, but it heavily weighs the

standardized test scores on PARCC. So at best, it's an academic indicator, not a rating of the school.

7. Last year, DCPS was embroiled in a series of scandals around graduation rates, leading to calls for an independent research entity to provide better analysis of how our schools are doing. Do you agree that such an entity, outside of the control of the Mayor, is needed? **Yes** or No _____

If yes, what do you think would be the most sensible model?

There is a crisis of credibility and trust in relation to school and school system data. We've always needed an independent research entity from which cities like Chicago have benefited. But now, more than ever, it is needed in our city. I think legislation proposed by Councilmember Cheh, both to establish an independent research consortium and to make OSSE independent of the mayor, are steps in the right direction.

8. The State Board of Education voted on and approved the use in DC of the PARCC test to satisfy federal testing requirements under ESSA. Only 3 states and DC are now committed to using PARCC. Some states have advocated de-emphasizing standardized testing as the measure of success in education.

How do you view the role of standardized testing in DC schools?

Standardized test scores can provide useful data, if they are used as one among many criteria for assessing student learning. But they have had far too much weight in DC schools. They should never be used to evaluate teachers or principals, as most educational testing experts agree. They should not be used for high-stakes decisions for students or schools. As an educator, I know that there are much better ways to evaluate students' academic achievement. But having said all this in response to your question, getting rid of PARCC may not be my highest priority to change. We've had too much turmoil and disruption in our education system. My goal will be to reduce over reliance on PARCC as the measure that overrides other important measures, including teacher knowledge of student growth and

learning.

9. Almost half DC students now attend public charter, not neighborhood, schools in the District of Columbia. We have over 200 publicly funded schools and 66 separate school systems (65 charter school systems and DCPS). Up to 20 new charter schools can open each year.

Should the Council and/or Mayor have the authority to limit the expansion of charter schools? **Yes** No___ Please explain your answer.

I don't think a healthy DCPS system can be maintained if the charter sector is allowed to grow much beyond 50%. I therefore advocate giving Council and the Mayor the authority to put a cap on the charter sector now. It is essential for there to be an overall, cross-sector plan for how/where schools are opened. Further, we need to take steps toward building coherent and stable from pre-K through 12 feeder patterns in every ward. I don't think any of this can happen without having more cross-sector coordination and collaboration, which I think would lead to limiting the number of charter schools.

10. Should the Council and/or Mayor have authority over charter school siting (where they are located)? **Yes** No___

Please explain your answer.

Similar to my response to the previous question, I think there needs to be more cross-sector coordination so we can build a strong, cohesive education ecosystem that serves all our families and students well. It benefits no one to grant permission to a charter school to open but then to allow the school to locate anywhere they can find a building, whether the neighborhood needs another school of the kind being proposed or not. I think there should be a cross-sector body that supports and guides building procurement once a charter school proposal has been approved.

11. The following issues are of great concern in our city. Which of these issues do you think is most important and why?

- Funding equity [L] [SEP]
- School diversity/ integration [L] [SEP]
- Giving disadvantaged student subgroups priority access to schools if they serve less than the [L] [SEP] district average [L] [SEP]
- Expanding the number and support for educators of color [L] [SEP]

All of these are very important and I think that my three campaign priorities address most of them in one way or another. For example, I advocate shifting from high stakes testing as the primary way to measure quality and improvement. According to a recent report from the Learning Policy Institute to do so would help attract and retain a more diverse and representative teaching corps. The report identifies the use of high stakes accountability measures and staff reconstitution or school closing, as DC has carried out over the past 11 years of school reform, as contributing to high attrition rates of teachers of color.

I advocate dialing back the weight of test scores on the school report card to 55% and making up the difference with criteria that actually encourage the kinds of practices and cultural norms we want to see in our schools. One of those criteria could be teacher retention rates and retention of a diverse teaching staff. The criteria might also include the number and quality of supports and professional development opportunities a school offers teachers.

Another of my priorities is bringing the supports we need to assure that all our neighborhood schools are safe, stable enriching environments where all students can thrive. While under current circumstances I do support giving disadvantages students priority access to schools that are serving less than the district average, I ultimately see our system of choice as a distraction from addressing the underlying problem, which is that not all schools have the supports they need to serve their communities well. I want to work toward eliminating the need for disadvantaged students to leave their neighborhoods in order to access high quality educational options. That is why I am an active member of the DCPS Community Schools Planning Committee, which is working to strengthen and expand Community schools that will bring targeted wrap around services to schools serving vulnerable

populations.

Finally, I advocate empowering those who know their schools the best, parents, educators, and students. I think principals and school staff who know the needs of their school community should be included in decisions about how school budgets are distributed and used. The fact that principals are using funding for At-Risk students to cover general staffing indicates that there's a disconnect between what is needed and what central office has allocated.

Similarly, we will never achieve true integration of our schools if we do not gain buy-in from, and engage, key stakeholders – families, students, and educators – in the process of creating more diverse and equitable schools.

12. The DC State Board of Education had a representative on the Mayor's Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force. Earlier this year, the task force put forward draft recommendations related to improving outcomes for at-risk students and creating a framework for coordinating planning decisions between DCPS and charter schools. Which recommendation do you think is the most important and why?

I think the recommendations having to do with resources to meet the need of at-risk students are probably most important. Identifying students at risk of being underserved when they first enter school, ensuring that funds go to meeting the needs of those students most in need, and assessing which schools might need more resources to meet the needs of particularly at-risk students stand out to me.

I was, frankly disappointed that there wasn't more in the cross sector task force recommendations. They did not address at all the disruption and lack of coherence that student mobility and the opening and closing of schools causes. They did not advocate pursuit of a Community Schools approach of wrap-around services and family engagement. They seemed to be advocating more school choice and more sharing of information as if the market was going to solve our problems. I will be more aggressive about proposing that we do some things differently for at-risk students and would

not be limited to the recommendations of the Cross Sector Task Force.

13. How should the SBOE hold the Office of the State Superintendent of Education accountable?

The powers of the School Board at present are limited in holding the State Superintendent accountable. They should be expanded. The State Board has certain authority on the ESSA school evaluation standards and on graduation requirements, so it has the authority to vote down recommendations from the State Superintendent. Unfortunately, the majority of the SBOE members did not follow feedback given by the public to do that. So first, we need a majority on the SBOE willing to do more than rubber stamp the State Superintendent. We also need more structural authority for the SBOE.