

Jessica Sutter
Ward 6 C4DC Questionnaire

1. Why are you running for this office?

I'm running because all Ward 6 children and all Ward 6 schools deserve a State Board of Education representative who knows DC education in and out of the classroom and who will hold high expectations for all schools and students. When elected, I will work to ensure that the District provides equal educational resources and equal opportunities to succeed for all children. As the Ward 6 representative on the DC SBOE, I would seek to work collaboratively with education and government entities to advance high-quality education for all DC children. I believe that all representatives on the SBOE must view both ward residents and students in ward schools as their constituents. I am deeply committed to representing all Ward 6 students, wherever they attend school and all Ward 6 schools, wherever their students live.

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

As the Ward 6 representative on the State Board of Education, I will count all Ward 6 residents and students and families of all Ward 6 schools as my constituency. During the six months of my campaign to date, I have visited 23 of the 36 schools in Ward 6, knocked on more than a thousand doors, attended house gatherings hosted by residents, ANC meetings all across the ward, multiple public engagement sessions hosted by education agencies, and have had conversations with thousands of Ward 6 residents and school personnel. I would continue this level of engagement as a member of the SBOE, seeking to see our schools firsthand and engage personally with constituents as often and in as many venues as possible.

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?

I have worked in education for my entire 20-year career to date. I began teaching in 1999, and spent seven years teaching middle school social studies and literature, first in an inner-city Chicago Catholic school, and then in public charter schools in East Los Angeles and Southeast Washington, DC. I spent my last two years of teaching at KIPP DC: KEY Academy. I've been privileged to teach nearly 800 young people and to stay in touch with many of them in the decade since I left the classroom. I worked in both the DC Office of the State Superintendent for Education and the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education under Mayor Vince Gray and currently run an education consulting practice which serves both local and national, schools, districts and education organizations. I hold an MA in Education Policy Studies and earned my PhD in the same field from the University of Maryland in 2018.

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?

I support continued Mayoral control of schools in the District. I think the reforms DC has been able to implement over the past decade, including expanding the supply of school options, are a direct result of mayoral control and I think the current governance structure will enable DC to implement future promising reforms that will increase equity and opportunities for all students.

The State Board of Education's most important roles are approving state accountability plans that reflect high expectations of all DC students and advocating for state-level policies that provide equitable educational opportunities for all students. Establishing a common set of expectations for excellence and a common system of public reporting for all public schools is one essential function of the DC SBOE. However, setting the standard is just the first step.

The SBOE must proactively advocate for state-level policies that lead to educational equity for all children in the District. If elected, I would advocate for equitable funding for both DCPS and public charter schools, equitable funding allocations to schools serving high-needs students (including ensuring per-pupil funds dedicated to at-risk students actually reach the schools those children attend), and an equitable distribution of quality teachers to schools serving high numbers of at-risk students.

I do see the possibility of an evolving role for the State Board of Education, but perhaps not immediately. As I've canvassed around Ward 6 every weekend meeting voters, the number one question I have received is "What does the State Board actually do?" The State Board of Education needs to show the community that it has a tangible impact on how schools serve their children. We cannot reasonably ask the community for permission to have more authority over their students and schools when they have not seen positive impact from our work thus far.

5. Should charter schools be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the open meetings laws for boards of directors? **No**
Please explain your answer.

I support strong transparency of data and information for all public schools in DC, including public charter schools. Subjecting single-site charter schools to the same FOIA requirements as a large school district such as DCPS would impose a significant burden on the ability of such a school to focus on its key mission – serving and educating students. Currently, all public charter schools must submit budgets, annual audits and other financial documents, as well as board meeting schedules and minutes to PCSB annually. PCSB is subject to FOIA, and all of those documents for all charter schools can be requested from PCSB. Additionally, PCSB provides access to current year financial documents for charter schools on their website. Extending transparency matters; in schools that operate differently from the traditional district, the system to provide transparent data may not look the same for public charter schools.

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** Please explain your answer.

I am glad that the OSSE will issue STAR ratings as a common accountability report for all publicly-funded schools in the District. Having such a system in place across all public schools will provide three important things our city has not had to date:

- 1. Opportunity for essential discussion with common, easily comparable data about where our schools stand annually in relation to the state-accountability standards we've set for them;*
- 2. A means of allowing the public, especially parents, to annually compare all public schools using common metrics;*
- 3. A statewide report card that can be iteratively improved over time with changes that will affect both DCPS and public charter schools on the same timeline.*

Categorizing schools will inevitably lead to some difficult conversations about schools that receive one or two star ratings. These conversations are long overdue and, if handled thoughtfully, can lead to greater investment in schools that show growth with at-risk students. I believe using data to shine a light on schools that struggle with growth and student achievement is essential to ensuring that we close the opportunity and achievement gaps for Black, Latino, low-income and at-risk students, as well as students with disabilities. I also believe the STAR ratings will help OSSE & SBOE identify schools that may be models to learn from and replicate to further accelerate positive student outcomes

I support the measures that SBOE and OSSE selected for the STAR report, but I also appreciate that there is a plan to consider adding additional measures and revising the weights of existing measures over time.

Balancing academic growth and achievement is exceptionally important, and I am pleased the SBOE and OSSE landed on a 30 percent achievement and 40 percent growth share for the elementary and middle school report cards. While we know growth is essential for all of our students, including those who are far behind their grade level achievement standards, we will do our students a disservice if we do not expect their schools to keep pushing until they close the gap to grade level achievement. If our middle school students do not enter high school at or approaching grade level, we have set them up for failure on the path to productive secondary learning and post-secondary adult life.

I am also glad that School Environment measures represent a quarter of the total STAR rating. These metrics are “canaries in the coal mine” for whether a school has set up conditions for learning that pave the way for academic growth and achievement.

All of that said, I believe that continuous improvement is essential for effective public policy. Policy has too often been enacted but not revisited for periodic updates to address implementation challenges. This is a lost opportunity and one we should not miss with ESSA. As the District implements its first school year of ESSA-based accountability, I would like to see each member of the SBOE host forums and online opportunities for their constituents to provide feedback on the accountability plan. The Board should compile and share that city-wide

information with OSSE and advocate for the commonly-heard feedback to be incorporated into revisions of the second year of implementation.

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

As an education researcher, I value and respect the role education research can play in shaping policy decisions. I wholeheartedly support the creation of an independent research consortium to study education in the District of Columbia. However, I do not believe it belongs in the Office of the DC Auditor (ODCA), even for an “incubation period.”

DC should leverage the Auditor’s Office to examine our education system more thoroughly. The auditor should play an essential role in making sure that quality education data exists, is managed with integrity, and is made available for research and oversight purposes.

The DC region is home to world class research institutions and we should leverage the talent of researchers at local universities and think-tanks to launch a research-practice partnership that will increase the knowledge base and provide analyses that can inform future policy decisions. In Chicago, New York, and Baltimore education research partnerships are housed at universities and the research agenda is co-created by researchers, education leaders, policy makers, and community members. The DC Council should allocate funding in the FY2019 budget for a truly independent research consortium, housed outside of government and should request proposals from research institutions in the city to identify a qualified host for this essential work.

A strong, independent research consortium will benefit the District’s education system, but it alone will not fix what ails us. We need to ensure that all agencies and elected officials with responsibility for education are doing their jobs, thoroughly and with fidelity. The role of “watchdog” is ideally suited for the Auditor’s Office.

DC needs an independent research consortium. It also needs a watchdog. It should have both – and they should not reside in the same place.

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 testing is a catch-all term that describes different assessments given in schools. Some standardized tests, like the PARCC, are given to collect information on how schools are performing. Unfortunately, this assessment data does not make its way back to schools and teachers in time (or in a format) to be useful for planning for the next school year. Because of

this, many schools also employ other standardized tests, like the NWEA-MAP, to provide teachers with actionable data on student progress that can inform instructional decision-making. I believe both forms of standardized testing are necessary for our schools and students.

I strongly believe that annual statewide testing is necessary. I also believe that schools deserve the opportunity to assess students in ways that help inform their teachers in real time. I would like to ensure that we use the minimum amount of time necessary to accomplish both of those types of assessment. I'd also like to see the results of statewide PARCC testing made more useful to teachers and school leaders. This year's results were provided to schools in August. Getting earlier access to test results would allow for PARCC data to be a meaningful tool in planning instruction, interventions, and enrichment for students. As more schools choose computer-based testing, there is simply no reason the results cannot be provided sooner.

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? Y

No X Please explain your answer.

While the law permits up to 20 charter schools to open per year, the annual history of charter expansion in DC has been considerably more modest. This past year, no new charter applications were approved for expansion. Keeping the responsibility for public charter school expansion under the authority of the Mayor-appointed Public School Board seems appropriate at this time.

10. Should the Council and/or Mayor have authority over charter school siting (where they are located)? Please explain your answer.

If charter schools are being sited in public buildings, a government entity such as the Mayor or Deputy Mayor for Education (DME) should have authority over siting. Another way to think about siting schools might be for the Mayor or DME to use citywide planning data to identify areas of the city where student population growth will exceed existing capacity and then invite proposals from both DCPS and PCSB for new schools to open in these locations. Communities can weigh in on these applications in similar fashion to the public engagement processes currently used for disposition of public school facilities to public charter schools.

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 • School diversity/ integration • Giving disadvantaged student subgroups priority access to schools if they serve less than the district average • Expanding the number and support for educators of color

While I think that each of these issues is of significant importance, I'm inclined to focus jointly on funding equity for schools and increasing priority access to schools for students in subgroups currently underrepresented in those schools. I believe these two goals should be pursued in tandem to achieve the same goal: closing opportunity gaps for children who have historically been underserved. Providing priority access to students in subgroups that are currently underrepresented will increase diversity and integration in schools and counter some of the segregation that results from residential patterns in the District.

Specifically, I'd like us to ensure that the at-risk funding allocated for students with high-needs are actually getting to their schools, and not being used to supplement LEA-wide services that may or may not serve students at-risk of academic failure. I would also like to ensure that any priority access granted to schools is accompanied by outreach to parents to provide information and support about how to apply for such access via the My School DC lottery.

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?

The first and second recommendations of the At-Risk Working Group were most compelling to me. Since I explained my interest in the first as part of my response to Question 11, I'll focus on the second recommendation here – the suggestion to invest in efforts to identify, share and expand programs that serve at-risk students effectively. I'd like to see us look at the methods used by institutions that have had success serving students considered at-risk. Empower K12 has identified ten schools with PARCC test results showing bold growth among at-risk students; I'd suggest we research what's happening in these schools then elevate and share techniques used by these schools to innovate in other schools. In a school system like DC, where nearly half of the students are in public charter schools, we can't treat charters as a fringe element. We need to see where things are going well and then collaborate, irrespective of the labeling on the school.

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

The Mayor appoints the State Superintendent and the Council holds oversight hearings on the agency budget and performance. I do not see a clear role for the SBOE in holding the OSSE accountable at this time, but I do think the SBOE must proactively advise OSSE, proposing state-level policies that will lead to educational equity and opportunity for all children in the District.