

Carol Schwartz

Candidate Questionnaire

1. **How committed are you to ensuring we have a citywide network of excellent DCPS neighborhood schools serving children from pre-K through high school to which families have a right to attend (without being subject to a lottery)?**
 - a. **Absolutely?**
 - b. **It would be nice?**
 - c. **It is not necessary given the other choices available?**

If “Absolutely”, what steps would you take to make it a reality? If b or c, what is your response to families around the city who crave both quality and predictability?

Absolutely. We do have quite successful neighborhood schools in our city and we must ensure that they remain so. A prime issue facing those schools is overcrowding. As the population in the District increases and those schools continue to be attractive, we must be prepared. Second campuses of successful schools may need to be considered. To that end, it would be smart to hang onto our facilities for our own needs, and make sure our property is not practically given away to developers or anyone else.

However, we still have too much disparity in the quality of neighborhood schools, and a vicious cycle has ensued in our city. Because of underperforming neighborhood schools, many families have chosen to send their kids to better performing schools further away. As the neighborhood school enrollment dropped so did the resources to that school, thus causing more families to flee to other schools and eventually resulting in the neighborhood schools having to close. Now, in those areas, there are no neighborhood schools and the options for students and families have been narrowed.

It is especially troublesome that small children have to be transported longer distances and spend the day far from home. Ultimately, the odds get more and more stacked against them. Although the proposed boundary changes are causing anxiety for families, I do believe some of the changes are necessary in order to create a system of neighborhood schools with predictable feeding patterns. Having that stable predictability is an essential ingredient to gain high-quality schools in every neighborhood.

Improving our high-need schools requires an enormous influx of resources, and the best resources don't always take the form of money. Students in these schools require more personalized and more individualized attention. Thus, I would tap into the enormous resources we have among retired educators in our city and the surrounding jurisdictions by issuing a call to service. After completing a review process that ensures security, these educators would be deployed as tutors and mentors to high-need children and youth. To combat parking issues as well as resistance to go to unknown parts of the city, bus service would pick the volunteers up from centralized locations and take them to schools throughout the District.

To enable the change desperately needed for high-needs schools, I would transform them into centers of the community with afternoon, evening and weekend adult education programs. On the other end of the spectrum, I would open school-based day care centers in schools with a high percentage of disadvantaged children, employing the services of qualified professionals and retirees who would give care to children while their parents pursue their own education or career development training. I would make sure that wrap-around services, including nursing and nutritional meals, are available. Making schools more community-oriented would connect more families to their neighborhood schools. And as we all know, the more that families are focused and present in schools, the more everyone benefits.

Longer instructional time could benefit high-need students. According to *The Washington Post* on July 7, 2014, seven of the eight schools with extended-day programming for the 2012-2013 school year showed improvement in math and reading. Of course, teachers would be compensated for any longer instruction time.

The neighborhood schools which are currently succeeding are on the rise not only because of the quality of teaching and curriculum, but because these students are lucky enough to have a supportive village in the form of educated families and resources at home. Thus, we need to give our high-need schools more of a village. I believe a community school construct plus added tutoring resources will help accomplish that.

2. Should there be a mechanism for coordinated planning between DCPS and the Public Charter School Board relating to the opening, closing or expansion of schools?

If you believe there should be such a mechanism, what are your ideas for how it might operate? If you do not, what is your vision for what the education infrastructure should look like 10 or 20 years down the road? How should we ensure our money spent on public education (1 in 5 of our tax dollars) is spent efficiently and effectively?

I believe the innovation and independence of charter schools, and the competition they provide, have been helpful to our educational system.

Yet as charter school enrollment approaches 50%, we must also think about how charter schools and traditional public schools can better cooperate as part of a shared system.

Coordination is virtually non-existent between charter schools and DCPS. We saw this recently when a science-focused charter school, Harmony School of Excellence-DC, was placed adjacent to a science-focused public school, Langley Elementary. I believe it would be much better to put a new science-focused charter school in areas of the city not now served by one.

I would like to see the District of Columbia Charter School Board have regular meetings with the Chancellor regarding planning and coordination of school locations and expansions.

In addition, there is more opportunity for charter and traditional schools to learn from each other. Sam Chaltain, in his book *Our School: Searching for Community in the Era of Choice* examined an older traditional public school and a new, innovative charter school. He points out that each has strengths the other does not. It's time to better harness the experience of each: the institutionalized practice of public schools and

the experimentation of charter schools, and have them share best practices to lift all students in the system.

In regard to money being spent efficiently and effectively, I believe more coordination between DCPS and the Charter School Board will help accomplish this; more coordination will ensure that schools are being introduced where most needed. I believe more transparency of charter school financial operations is also a step in the right direction.

We know that we spend a lot of money per student in the District, while not always getting the results we want considering the investment. I believe that more investment in community-type schools as I detailed above will translate into positive results. And we should measure those results and make necessary adjustments. Furthermore, many school dollars have been taken out of the system and used for special education programs at private institutions. I would continue the trend of building solid quality special education programs within our school system.

- 3. Many believe an increasing number of DCPS elementary schools are gaining traction and the next major challenge is to strengthen our DCPS offerings in the middle grades. Some call for replicating the success of our largest middle school – Alice Deal. The Student Assignment Committee called for opening four new middle schools – two in Ward 4, one in Ward 2 and one in Ward 7.**

What are practical ways to strengthen existing middle schools? Do you support the proposed new middle schools? If so, what would you do to ensure these middle schools are successful? If not, which of the new middle schools do you not support and why?

Middle schools have been an issue for a while for DC Public Schools. My three children were an exception. They stayed from pre-k through grade 12. However, many families send their children to the elementary schools, then leave DCPS at the middle school level. What's interesting, though, is that only at the middle school level do we discover some of the deficiencies of our elementary schools. In middle schools, the standards are raised, and when students don't have the basic skills, it shows. So in order to help middle schools we must further strengthen our elementary schools.

I support the opening of new middle schools. I also would push for the influx of resources in the form of tutors and wrap-around services to happen at the middle school level, where we are most at risk of losing students. I would also tap into the intellectual and cultural institutions in our area to become involved in education programs, especially at the middle school level, so that there are more attractive and stimulating initiatives for students.

- 4. There are two, perhaps competing, goals in DC – one is to preserve and strengthen a system of neighborhood schools of right, the other is to create socio-economically integrated schools. Do you agree that these are two of our most important goals? What strategies would you advocate to accomplish both of these goals?**

I agree that both of these goals are important. In one respect, I believe the boundary changes currently proposed will strengthen our neighborhood school system. However, I am concerned that

some of the proposed changes, such as drawing a boundary across the Anacostia River, will exacerbate segregation, especially as demographic changes happen in the District. Any turning back the clock on *Brown vs. the Board of Education* concerns me greatly. On the other hand, I am encouraged to see that the new boundary plan does set aside 10% of seats in every elementary school for out-of-boundary students as well as 15% for middle school and 20% for high school. The proposal also says that at-risk students should have the opportunity for 25% of those seats in more affluent schools. This does ease some of my fears about our schools becoming more segregated, but I would like consideration of upping the out-of-boundary percentages to 15%, 20%, and 25% respectively. I believe ensuring these set-asides will help achieve both goals: a strengthened system of neighborhood schools of right and socio-economically integrated schools.

5. Are you satisfied with the transparency of the DCPS and charter school budgets? Are you satisfied with the mechanisms for community input and the time allowed for planning to construct those budgets? If not, what methods would you suggest be put in place so that transparency and planning are improved in both sectors?

I would like to see increased oversight of charter schools. We've recently seen several cases of misappropriation of schools funds by charter school managers. We need increased transparency of the finances relating to charter schools and the other business engagements of charter school operators to ensure that our public tax dollars are not being wasted and abused.

The financial matters within DCPS are more transparent, but we should be ever-vigilant that is the case and will remain so.

6. Have we gotten the amount of standardized testing we do right? Are the stakes attached to standardized tests -- for teachers, principals and schools -- right? Do you see an interplay between the tests we focus on and the texture and richness of the curriculum in our schools? If so, is that a positive interplay? If not, how would you address the issue?

When I was elected to the Board of Education 40 years ago, there were no standardized tests. I fought to bring them back. I firmly believed and still do that we have to know how our students were measuring up compared to other students around the country. Even if, or especially if it's bad news, we need to know that in order to improve. Yes, I believe that standardized tests are crucial benchmarks for progress, but I never thought that they should be the end-all and be-all of instruction and learning. We must not emphasize them so much that they stifle both teachers' and students' creativity. And don't we want our children to be well-rounded? So I believe that tests must serve as benchmarks but should not dictate the whole curriculum. We don't want our students to just be able to repeat back information. We want them to creatively apply knowledge, which is what succeeding in today's world is all about.

A *Washington Post* article from September 2, 2014 highlighted the approach Fairfax County, the 10th most populous school district in the nation, is taking, and it's an approach that I would like to consider. It's called "Portrait of a Graduate," which is a set of attributes each graduate of that system should possess. Superintendent Karen Garza calls it "a long-range strategic plan...that will lessen the

focus on standardized, high stakes testing.” As Fairfax School Board Member Janie Strauss explains in the article, “We all know we are in an era where it is not what you know but what you can do with what you know.” I agree and will work hard with the Chancellor to achieve a more balanced approach between testing and creative flexibility.

- 7. Which is a better indicator of the quality of a school? The percentage of children achieving proficiency or the average amount of growth achieved by children at the school? If you believe the latter is a better indicator, are we focusing adequately on it? What steps should we take to place the appropriate emphasis on it?**

I believe that the average amount of growth achieved by children at the school is the better determination in many circumstances. Our children enter school at different levels, and there are socio-economic factors at play. School principals should be given the latitude to adjust goals appropriate to their student bodies. Teachers and students should be recognized for good progress and growth even as we ultimately push for full proficiency.

- 8. Are you satisfied with our recruitment and retention of teachers and administrators? Does your view differ for DCPS and the charter sector? Data suggests we have very high turnover in both sectors, particularly in schools serving high poverty populations. According to published reports, 25% of principals leave each year and 50% of new teachers leave after two years, 80% after six years. Is that a good thing as evidence of an aggressive accountability rubric or a sign that something is wrong? If you believe something is wrong, what kinds of steps would you take to address this issue?**

I am very concerned about the rate of turnover and believe it presents evidence that something is wrong. The stability and skill that long-term principals and teachers provide is essential for building a quality school system and offering needed consistency for our kids.

I look back during Michelle Rhee’s tenure, when 1,000 teachers and 98 central staff were fired with little to no evaluations. While we do need to identify teachers and others who do not best serve DC students, I believe we eliminated many quality, veteran educators, basically throwing out the baby with the bathwater.

Malcolm Gladwell in his book *Outliers* writes of the need for 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert in a field. Yet in the mastery of teaching, this insight has gotten lost. I know from my own experience as a parent in our school system that some of my own children’s best teachers were individuals who were not much younger than I am right now. My kids as adults still remember and talk about the positive influence these teachers made in their lives. So we must value our good veteran teachers.

Many of the dismissed veteran teachers were replaced by young professionals from Teach for America (TFA), a great organization with quality people, but whose teachers often devote two or

three years to the profession, add the experience to their resumes, and then move on to better-paying jobs. A study published in *Phi Delta Kappan* in 2011 found that 56.4% of TFA teachers leave their initial placements in low-income schools after two years and by their fifth year, only 14.8% continue to teach in the same low-income schools to which they were originally assigned.

We need to encourage veteran teachers whose love for teaching will keep them in the classroom throughout their careers. The fear factor many teachers feel today works against that goal. On June 3, 2014, *The Washington Post* reported a teacher saying, “The stress and paranoia I feel on a daily basis...is frankly too much.” So though we must have strong evaluations, we should evaluate in a way that breeds improvement and not fear. In the cases when we do experience voluntary turnover, we need to find out exactly why and use that information to continually improve the system.

In order to help retain quality teachers, I want to help them develop opportunities whereby they obtain advanced degrees through low-interest loans, no-interest revolving fund loans, or scholarships at moderately priced local universities in exchange for set years of commitment to DCPS. Previously, I introduced a tax credit for teachers who live in the city and this is something I continue to support. I also know from my years in teaching and engagement as a public school parent that often the most gifted teachers are drawn away from the classroom. They can make more money as administrators or they often get recruited to be master teachers who observe others. Although it’s important for educators to get feedback from those who are highly skilled, we must be wise enough to keep our most gifted teachers in the classroom and reward them financially if they remain there. In addition, observation of those outstanding teachers in the classroom can be very helpful to novice teachers.

Overall, we must strike a balance between enforcing high standards for educators and rewarding achievement while creating a nurturing environment that encourages improvement and a long-term investment in the DCPS system. It’s in our best interest to create a culture that attracts good new teachers to the profession and at the same time, retain the good teachers we already have.

- 9. One of the frequently heard expressions is that we must “speed up” or “pursue with more urgency” education reform – generally thought of as what has been happening since the onset of mayoral control and the tenure of Michelle Rhee. Have we made significant progress in closing the achievement gap in this seven year period? If not, what does that say about our efforts to date? Does it suggest the need for a course correction? If so, which specific elements of what people refer to as “education reform” would you place greater emphasis on? Which specific elements would you move away from?**

I am heartened by some improvements in our schools. This fall, we saw the largest enrollment in DCPS in five years. And we have seen incremental improvements in the reading and math skills of DC Public School students overall, However, the reduction of the achievement gap – the performance of African-American and Hispanic students as compared to white students – has not kept pace.

Based on reports conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics, test results at a “basic” level or above among 4th graders in DCPS increased from 2007 to 2013 in reading (from 29% to 50%) and in math (from 50% to 65%). However, during that same period, test scores among African-American and Hispanic children improved somewhat but the gap remained the same. When analyzing the test results where students scored at a “proficient” level (i.e., test scores more desirable than “basic”), the overall results were similarly notable: from 2007 to 2013, the percentage of students who scored at this level increased from 14% to 25% in reading, and from 14% to 30% in math. Yet, the achievement gap as it relates to math scores remained virtually untouched, and worse yet, the reading skills test score disparity between white students and both African-American and Hispanic students actually grew.

Given that African-American and Hispanic children comprise 84% of DC Public School students, it is obvious we have a long way to go.

In order to start dramatically closing that achievement gap and to bridge other divides, I have created the idea of the Mayor’s Office of Disparity Solutions (MODS) to couple the DC Public Schools with other departments and agencies of the government to better provide those wrap-around services I spoke of above. This Office would report directly to me if I am elected and each department would have MODS official to ensure coordination of the services needed by our students to succeed.

I have been for many of the reform introduced in our school system, including more accountability. But I do not believe some of the “reforms” we have put in place have helped our students overall. Clearing out veteran teachers and giving too draconian evaluations have not always resulted in the desired effect. I believe the evaluation system needs to emphasize improvement of the teaching. We need to promote efforts that retain teachers and encourage stability. Reforms I would push for are longer instructional time, as well as longer school days with activities afterschool, especially for high-need schools. I agree with increasing funding for at-risk students. And I believe we need the influx of resources in the forms of tutoring and wrap-around services for high-need schools which I described in detail earlier.