



2013 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Leah Puryear

On November 5, 2013, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on the Charlottesville School Board. This recording is Tim Shea's September 23, 2013 interview with Leah Puryear. The other candidates in this race include: Ned Michie and Juandiego Wade.

The audio of this interview and complete election coverage is available on the Charlottesville Tomorrow website:

http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/topics/city_elections/

INTERVIEW

Ms. Puryear, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio 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, C-VILLE Weekly, 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, some of the questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, others have not. All City 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. Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on the Charlottesville School Board.

Well this is my third run for a seat on the City School Board. I feel that with my prior experience, I have knowledge of our students, their abilities, things that need to be improved. I understand the workings of our school budget and all the things that go into compiling a budget and making it efficient and effective, not only for the students but for everyone; particularly those people in the City of Charlottesville who are all of our citizens who are responsible for a large portion of the funding of the school division. And we must be good stewards of the funds; and with less and less money, and with more and more requirements; I feel that people with that knowledge and that background make them suited for the position.

As director of Upward Bound at the University of Virginia one of our major goals is college access, so we are preparing students to graduate from high school on time and to go to college. So these skills and knowledge also transfer to my position on the school board.

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

For me, my top priority is reconfiguration. We had an efficiency review that was completed when I first got on the board. We spent a lot of time doing what we call town hall meetings, neighborhood forums, talking to the people, and not only those people who had children in school but people have a general sense and knowledge of education. And it was the consensus now, and then, that reconfiguration is something that should happen. And I feel that that would help our schools make us more efficient, make us better ready for the academic challenges ahead, and that is going to take a lot of focus, and a lot of concentration, and feel that I am up to the challenge and I really want to see that done.

3. Is your school division recruiting the best teachers and measuring their performance effectively? How do you know?

We are. Charlottesville is a very unique community. It is only ten square miles. But the cost of living in this area is very high. So when you are looking at recruiting the best teachers, which I feel we do, we also have to look at what is it costing for those individuals to live here. What about quality of life? Will they be able to sustain their quality of life? Our salaries are competitive with all of the school divisions in the Central Virginia area. There is a true and strong camaraderie here in the city. I think those of us on the school board that live and have been here for a while are able to help our newly employed teachers. I think our human resources department does an excellent job in

going out to recruit the best and brightest teachers from a diverse applicant pool to bring those individuals to our school division, and I am very pleased. I feel that we are doing that because each year when we get the presentations from our HR department we see the improvements. When people leave the city schools, it's not because they hate the schools. This is a transient community, and many people are here for post-doctorate fellows, their spouses and/or significant others or they are here for graduate school. And when those things are over then the spouses move to other areas and we lose people accordingly. But our evaluations indicate how these individuals have enjoyed their experience, how this has helped them grow. We do grow our faculty and at some point they move on to bigger and better things. Teachers progress, they go to assistant principals, principals, associate and assistant superintendents, and ultimately superintendents. So I feel that the types of things we are doing here are good for us while they are here, and for preparing those individuals for life after the school division.

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

I think that there are persistent achievement gaps not necessarily because of socioeconomics. Heretofore people felt that that's what it was, but I have never been convinced. I have been convinced that it is experience and knowledge. If you are looking at standardized tests particularly the SAT exam, that is knowledge based exam, and if our students don't have certain exposures, that impacts their abilities. One of the things I have been very proud of with our Superintendent Dr. Atkins is her vision to see that experiences and exposures and knowledge helps you learn. And we expect the same from all of our students. Expect the best, and you will get the best. And because you come from a particular socioeconomic background regardless of race, you still have the same opportunities in our school division as if you were a very high income family. And we expect high things; we have high standards for all of our students and so because we expect that of them and we expose them to those things that you and I have been fortunate enough to experience from our parents, then our children are achieving. And if we continue to do that, high expectations and exposure, knowledge, it will continue to shrink and we are seeing that that is happening.

5. Describe a part of the school division that would benefit from increased city and county cooperation that you would make a priority?

Our school divisions are next door to each other. I am a product of the Commonwealth of Virginia Public Schools. I am from the Tidewater area. I graduated from the Hampton City public schools. And right next door were the Newport News City public schools. And you have to collaborate. I think professional development with our instructional staff and other team members, I think sharing of things that we order that are similar, when you

order in bulk you save money. I think collaboration with some of our knowledge experiences that we do; when we take trips, or do things for the students, bring different people in, and have everybody a part of that. Things that are educational occur outside of the classroom, and I think when we are doing professional development we will see that occurring inside of the classroom. But like I said, some of our cultural activities and things that we do outside of the classroom to collaborate: when we are looking to do things in science and technology, maybe bringing in speakers, or having the students participate in different type of NASA events or science and lab events, competitions of that type. I think that would be a wonderful thing. And we do collaborations. And although we are two separate school divisions, we have similar problems and we have different problems, and where we have similarities we work together. And I'm very proud of the work that Dr. Moran and Dr. Atkins continue to do to work together to bring about improvement to both school divisions.

6. What's your view of the proliferation of high stakes standardized tests?

Standardized test are things that everyone frowns upon. But I have to admit when we started talking about standardized tests and the standards of learning I was like, "Will we be able to meet the mark, what will we do, what do we need to do?" But standardized tests, believe it or not, serve a purpose.

It is a way for us to gauge how people are doing. My concern with standardized test is that we don't become so in awe of the test, that we teach to the test, and creativity and innovation goes out. So how do we take something that is very important, which may be an art lesson, but we are able to tie it to one of the measures in a social studies class, or a history class, or maybe even a math class; how to mix things together, how to measure in order to get particular colors.

And so I think that standardized tests are a way for us to see how are students are doing, but I also think it's a way for our teachers to look at how can we collaborate as a team. How can your math class help my science class? How can my science class help your English class?

I am concerned that each year, the stakes get higher. Charlottesville is an international refugee community. We have more students in our school division coming that are non-English speakers. And how we address the needs of those students, so that when it is time for them to take the test, they will perform just as well as those of us who are English speakers, and have had the advantages of knowing this system over a period of years. So I look forward to us doing those small mentoring, small tutorials and those types of things that we need to sure up our students so they feel successful when they're going into the rooms to take the test.

7. Would you support the regular involvement of a non-voting student representative on your School Board?

That would be an excellent idea. Students are becoming more and more active. When I was in high school I was very active in student government. I recently attended our National School Board Association and I met several students from other school boards from across the country that were there. And they bring a certain depth and breadth to the board. But I think what it helps us learn is what are they thinking. Are the types of things that we think are the best things for the students, the best things for the students? I also think it gives them buy-in. They understand the difficulties of what it's like when your primary function is to set policy for an entire school division. We hire and evaluate the superintendent, but that is not our first responsibility. It is to set Board policy, and that is difficult when you are trying to develop policies for 4000 people. That is a very daunting task. And I find that in Upward Bound, though I don't have 4,000 students in Upward Bound, when I speak to the students about why we are doing what we are doing, and why we have certain rules, they get buy in. They may not always agree, but they often will say well have you ever thought about doing it this way, and maybe we'll get the same result. So it's always nice to have a fresh eye and ear when you are making those decisions and I think that would be a very interesting concept for our school division.

8. Charlottesville City Council has provided the school division with one-time funds to balance recent budgets. What steps should Council and the School Board take to help build a more sustainable school budget?

We are very grateful to Council for all that they have done, and all that they continue to do. I believe we have got to develop a sustainable revenue stream for the schools.

Things recently that have happened are not due to anything that the school division has done to show that we are not good stewards of the funds. Fewer dollars are coming from the state, the sequester has impacted all school division budgets. So when you are looking at all of the over 130 school divisions in the commonwealth, everyone has been affected.

But I think that what has helped us is that our City Council understands education. And they appreciate what we have done, the results that we get, with the money that they give us. And we are good stewards of those funds but we are able to show them that when we have a financial crisis, we are able to tighten our bootstraps and look at what's on the paper, look at the impact of what's happening, and how that is going to affect the students. And what we do is we've developed an outside-in approach. So we look as far out as we can go before we actually impact the classroom. It means often we do more with less money, but people love what they do, and when you talk about

children; that energizes people. But I am very impressed with the fact that Council and Board are sitting down to have discussions about a sustainable revenue stream so they are not always put in a position of -- "Well, do we need to take this from contingency? Do we need to cut from another service that is just as important as the schools?" -- so that they are not feeling that they are having to make decisions that are not the best for the citizenry of Charlottesville.

9. 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?

I support reconfiguration, I said that earlier. And fingers crossed that it happens in the next term. I think it would be excellent, because it would allow us to free up some space to do the work we are doing by having the six elementary schools, the fifth graders are back in their home schools, it gives us a sense of stability as it relates to doing our standardized tests for the third and the fifth grades. Those students that are in the sixth through eighth grades are in one building, they are ready to be in that building, that gives them a sense of security so that when they are doing their testing they are in the same environment for a while. And it is fewer transitions, you are doing three transitions instead of four transitions which I think is advantageous to the students. It's a help to the parents, and as I said it gives us more space. For our division offices one and two, for our alternative school environment, it gives us more spaces for conference space, our preschool program, all of the things we do within our division. That means our building are running more efficiently, and we are using our money wisely.