



2015 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: Amy Laufer (I)

On November 3, 2015, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to four seats on the Charlottesville School Board. This recording is Brian Wheeler's August 26, 2015 interview with incumbent Amy Laufer (I). Other candidates in this race include: Adam Hastings (I); Sherry Kraft (I); and incumbent Jennifer McKeever (I).

The audio recording of this interview and complete election coverage is available on Charlottesville Tomorrow's website: <http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/cityvote>

INTERVIEW

Ms. Laufer, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio recording 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, The Daily Progress, 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, the first two questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, for the others you have been provided only the topic in advance. All Charlottesville 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. QUALIFICATIONS: Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on the Charlottesville School Board.

Currently I am the chair of the School Board, I was elected for year ago, and previous to that I have my Masters in Education, I was a middle school math and science teacher for about seven years, I was in the Peace Corps at a school in Jamaica. And locally, I was on the Commission for Children and Families as a parent representative, and I was also involved with the Special Education Advisory Committee, which I still am, but as a School Board member, not as a parent. I've been the PTO chair at Greenbrier [Elementary], and I've been part of the Gang Reduction Through Community Intervention with the city and county, and I'm also on the Black Male Achievement Committee through the city.

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

My priority is maintaining and improving and increasing our graduation rate, and the way I want to do that is through focusing on reading levels, truancy and attendance and professional development with our teachers. In my work on the Board, we've looked at a lot of different data, and we have increased our graduation rate within the last 10 years, but it seems that there are some gap groups that need to be focused on: special education, English language learners and minority students. And the way I would like to focus on that is through professional development with our teachers.

A couple years ago we did a full-on math development for our teachers, and we saw a major increase for our math performance on the SOLs, so we are going to be implementing this year some professional development for reading for all staff members, because we feel like first-time instruction being as critical as it is, reading is something that's important to all subject areas, so that's one area that we're focusing on this year.

We're also talking about extending the school day for students who are reading below grade level for students in grades one through six, and we know that it's about 20 percent to 30 percent of our students that are facing that each year. With the interventions we currently have they continue to make progress, but each year, they still can't make that next step, so I'm very passionate about that and I think that will be a way to improve our graduation rates.

And we've also been working with [State Senator] Creigh Deeds and our delegate David Toscano on our SOL scores for English language learners at the high school level, because each year we get students who come in with no experience in formal education and having them pass an SOL test within the six months required is really difficult. And those students are most likely our dropouts, so trying to give some wiggle room in terms of the pass rate for those students is critical. That has actually gone really well, we actually want to increase the amount of students who we can effect with that.

And then with regards to truancy and attendance, we see kindergarten as an area of focus I believe. We have between 18 to 30 percent of our kindergarteners are not coming to school on-time and every day, so making sure we educate the parents on how critical kindergarten is. I mean, when we went to kindergarten there was a lot of sleep time and milk time, now our kindergarten is pretty robust in terms of reading expectations and learning the school day. And we want to make sure that the parents don't see it as an extension of preschool, but that it is school time.

And we also see, in our middle school, grades five through eight, we have 20 percent to 27 percent of our students that are absent more than 10 days. We've implemented a program called Check and Connect with the city, and we've seen improvement in attendance, and that is a program that really focuses on individualized attention and talking with the families to make sure that the kids get there on-time—incentives. And we're increasing that program to two of our elementary schools this year. So I'd like to increase that, monitor that to make sure that we're getting everything we can to get the students to school on-time, every day and ready to learn.

Those would be my focus for the next four years.

3. EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: Business leaders and social service agencies have told local government that new investments are sorely needed in the area of early childhood education. Will you make pre-K education and quality childcare a priority and if so how?

I believe that we have made pre-K education a priority. We have currently 220 students enrolled in our three- and four-year-old program. The three-year-old program is fully funded through the city, and the four-year-old program is joint with the state Department of Education as well. I think if we are to increase our pre-K education at this point, we need to have reconfiguration occur, because 220 students is really a school of itself, and if we were to expand, I think currently with our model of a preschool in each of our elementary schools, the capacity is not there to increase it by much more, so if we were to increase it, it would have to be in a building of its own. There's a lot of pros and cons to both, but I think having one preschool building can allow us to service more students, and we can also combine preschool services. A lot of the students who we are seeing in our preschool program have special needs, and we need physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists, and they could be housed right in the building, instead of having to transfer through all of the schools. So I think that could really help bolster our preschool program.

- 4. ONLINE LEARNING: Schools officials have said that graduating students who are literate with technology will benefit the entire community, but many students have said that their teachers often lack the expertise/training to use the technology, and that they don't want their teachers replaced by computers. Please describe the role you think technology should play in the classroom.**

Well first I want to say that probably my nine-year-old can use my iPhone more effectively than I can, so I understand the concerns of these students, and I understand kind of the fear that some of these teachers have about computers, and it all comes down to professional development, and giving these teachers time with the tools so they can implement them effectively.

I don't want to see teachers replaced by computers. I mean, computers, absolutely students need to have access to them and have knowledge and skills with them because every single job they're going to have is going to involve some kind of online, etc. So I actually think our schools have done a phenomenal job implementing our 1:1. Maybe the technology was not the best, but we've replaced those this year with a laptop that is touchscreen. So I would tackle this with professional development. But we absolutely have to have computers and as much online for our students so they are prepared for the 21st century.

- 5. CATEC: Do you support the strategic plan of the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center? Should CATEC build a new facility at Piedmont Virginia Community College?**

I really support the strategic plan. It really marries what the state is doing with their pathways to jobs, and what the city is doing with their workforce development. I think it's a great partnership. We're working with the business leaders in the city and the county to find programs for students that they need jobs for, so I think that's a great partnership.

In terms of moving the facility, I would say that is going to be a question of will the programs be more effective if implemented at PVCC, what kind of use for the land at CATEC currently, what would we do with the building, what kind of monies would we need to actually build a facility there? I think there's a lot of information that we still need before we can make a decision on that. I definitely support that if we feel like the programs being implemented at PVCC will be more effective for our kids, then I would support the finding that that would be better place there.

- 6. TEACHERS: Are we recruiting the best teachers, measuring their performance effectively and paying competitive salaries? How do we know?**

I think that we are absolutely paying competitive salaries. We do a comparison of other school divisions and we are right around the top. You can see that in our budget priorities for the last four years, quite frankly. And I do think we are recruiting the best teachers. We are going to many universities, talking about Charlottesville, and you know this year, instead of just talking about our school division, we've been

talking about our city and all that we have with our Fridays After Five, all the dining opportunities, the performances, the Paramount, the vineyards. We're trying to talk about not just the schools, but the lifestyle that Charlottesville can offer. I think that is a way to recruit new talent, because they're not just looking at the school itself, they're looking at the whole lifestyle.

And I do think we measure the performance effectively. We have our walk through, each of our principals go through goal setting with each one of the teachers. And the schools themselves have goals that they are trying to attain. So yes, I think we do an amazing job with our teachers.

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

Well I think that I just talked about the things that I'm interested in doing, and I think the achievement gap is much more complicated than a number on a test. Many of our students are coming with a wide variety of abilities and home life experiences that we have to tackle each one individually. And I think a lot of it is professional development, it's the truancy and attendance things I'm talking about. We're working with the families making sure that they know that school is important and achievement is critical if we want to see students succeed beyond school, post-high school.

I think truancy, and extending the school day is going to be critical, because they're going to be engaged in something that is worthwhile for two hours after school. I think if you're going home...I think extending the school day, attendance policies, professional development, those are all ways to get at the achievement gap.

8. CITY-COUNTY-UVA RELATIONS: Describe a part of the school division that would benefit from increased cooperation by the city, county and / or the University of Virginia and that you would make a priority.

I think we have a lot of partnerships between the city, county and UVa, quite honestly, but I think one area where I'm focusing right now is black male achievement, where we are trying to partner up with Big Brothers Big Sisters, finding mentors for our young African-American boys. That's an area that I, quite frankly, would love to see some more of our UVa students work with. The fraternities, Madison House, these are all places that we are working with now to get more people involved. That is one of my priorities, I am working on that right now, and I think that could be very helpful.

9. GRADE RECONFIGURATION: 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?

That's a great question. So I absolutely support reconfiguration. In terms of achievement, we see a drop in test scores in fifth grade and then again in seventh grade, and I think that can be attributed somewhat to the fact that students are switching buildings, and we know from our parents that it's not an ideal situation to be in a school for two years and then to switch and move again only to be there for two year. So it's very inconsistent and it's already very difficult for our students who are already kind of on the cusp or the bubble so-to-speak. So I absolutely support that, and I also believe the preschool would be a main beneficiary in that because then we could also have our preschool housed in one location.

And funding, I will not joke, I think that is going to be difficult, and it's something that the City Council and the School Board has to work out. I applaud the City Council for doing the meals tax this year. That was a great effort to bridge our operational gap, but this will be another possible, you know, tax increase that we will have to be diligent about to make sure that this is what's best for this community, and to make sure we have public support to do it.

10. BUDGET / BLUE RIBBON COMMISSION FOR SCHOOL FUNDING: What steps should Council and the School Board take to help build a more sustainable school budget?

Well there were a lot of proposals with the Blue Ribbon Commission Report, including closing a school, increasing revenues through property tax and increasing the meals tax to two cents rather than one cent. This year, I want to see first the revenue that is generated through the meals tax, and I think the School Board's job is to come as close as we can to that number moving forward. I think the City Council did a great job implementing this and I'd like to see this year, what the revenue brings and then go back to the School Board's budget and make sure that that number is as close to the number the city has this year.