

Daily Progress Charlottesville School Board Candidate Questionnaire

(Responses organized by alphabetical order)

Christa Bennett

1. Why do you want to be on the Charlottesville School Board?

I want to be on the Cville School Board to make it easier for all parents and guardians to advocate for what their child needs to succeed in school, especially those from families historically excluded from decision-making in our district.

I'm the only School Board candidate who currently has a child in Cville City Schools, and I'm right in the middle of being a CCS parent: my eldest started kindergarten at Jackson-Via in 2013 and my youngest will graduate from CHS in 2031. Of the current seven School Board members, only two now have children in our schools. A large part of why I'm running now is that we need another parent rep on the Board.

2. What do you think qualifies you for a seat on the board? Why should someone vote for you?

People should vote for me because I have a proven track record of Getting Stuff Done. When students at Walker Upper Elementary wanted a playground, I set out to build them one. With the help of so many in our community, I raised the \$180,000 that was needed, both for the playground and to upgrade the ADA pathway that Walker shares with Crow Rec Center, to ensure that the playground is accessible to all in our community. I then worked with students to design the playground. They even voted on the final design they wanted! Finally, I oversaw its construction, and the playground opened in August. I see a problem, I find a solution, I work hard until it's done.

I've successfully advocated for a stronger CCS Wellness Policy, that put an end to the practice of recess being taken away as punishment and gave parents and students the ability to opt-out of the student being weighed at school.

I began my career in community development work, supporting education, job training, and healthcare access in post-conflict communities. Parents all over the world really want the same thing, for our children to be fed and healthy, get an education, and have a chance at a happy life. During that time, I learned a lot from community organizers about what makes a community strong, and that has inspired my advocacy work in Charlottesville.

I now serve as the Chief Operating Officer of Strive for College, a national organization that helps students with financial need get to college and graduate or complete other pathways to self-sustaining careers. I can use the same practices we use at Strive – 97% of our students go on to college – to help students here in Charlottesville.

3. Concerns about equity and achievement gaps have ramped up since the New York Times report in 2018. What does equity mean to you and what would a more equitable Charlottesville school division look like?

For me as a white woman, the more important question is what does equity mean to people of color, and how can I support the work they are already doing to achieve it?

This is one reason I am committing to holding regular listening sessions where any person in the community can come talk to me about our schools. In addition to then working with our community to create solutions to challenges, I will use the stories and feedback I receive from the community to create better policy. I hope this will be part of a process of including more people in our school policy decisions, so that we have more equitable policies and practices.

I've already started that process over the last few months by talking with Black and Latinx leaders at direct service organizations and at UVA about how we can work towards equity. One priority that the leaders mentioned to me several times was investing in preschool, so I've made that a priority for my candidacy and my tenure as a School Board member if I'm elected. I'm already having success in changing how we think and talk about CCS preschool: at the School Board candidate debate forum in mid-October, I said that the cost of reconfiguration is \$100million; when people say \$75m, they are referring to Buford, but building the preschool center is going to cost an additional \$25m. Preschool counts, too. Later that night, for the first time that I had heard, a news story reported the price of reconfiguration at \$100m. 100% of CCS preschoolers are from economically disadvantaged homes. 75% are students of color. If we're going to talk about equity, we must talk about preschool.

4. What will you do as a board member to close the achievement gaps?

Gloria Ladson-Billings is a phenomenal educator, and she talks about education debt rather than achievement gap. Instead of placing the burden on students – that they failed to achieve – it's saying that we, the adults, and our schools didn't provide what students needed to learn. Oftentimes, this is because of systemic racism and implicit biases and how they affect our policies and practices.

To pay our debt, we first need to be honest about the presence of systemic racism in our schools. Next, we must implement policies that will help dismantle those aggressions and biases. For example, we want to incorporate culturally relevant teaching. We want to continue looking at the data of which students are being punished in schools – historically, students of color, especially Black students, have been far more likely to receive suspensions and other disciplinary actions – and do everything we can, including trainings and evaluations, to safeguard Black children, Latinx children, and other children of color from disproportionate negative consequences in CCS schools.

There are also practical services: we need to provide more thorough academic counseling starting in sixth grade. Many students do not have sufficient information about what classes they need to take in high school if they want to go to college, especially a more selective college. This counseling needs to begin in sixth grade because students can take some high school credit courses in seventh and eighth grade.

I think we've started the journey on the above steps, but we still have a lot of road ahead of us. The education debt is significant, accumulated over many generations. There is no quick fix. There is only sustained work over many years. We cannot let up in paying regular installments on our debt.

5. Where do you think the division has fallen short in recent years? How will you address those areas as a board member?

As a new School Board member, I would look at our district in terms of, "Where are opportunities for growth?" Education is a complex, dynamic practice. Teachers, staff, admin, School Board members, we all have to adapt to evolving needs and resources. My instinct is to look at where we are now and what next steps we can take that will make our district even stronger for our kids.

I want to address equity. I want to address repairing and rebuilding after the pandemic, in both supporting children as they heal from the trauma of the pandemic and making sure that all students have the building blocks that they need for their education, to continue onto the next grade level and thrive academically long-term. I want to address providing academic counseling that will prepare all students for college or other pathways to self-sustaining careers.

6. Part of the equity conversations often includes the phrase, "It Takes a Village." How can the division move beyond that catching phrase and actually build partnerships with community groups that are more systemic?

I want to recognize the work that the Supervisor of Equity and Inclusion is already doing to systemize better engagement with all families in our district. During the pandemic when the district wanted parents' feedback, her office knocked on doors to reach people that the online survey wasn't reaching. That's the practical work that needs to be done. I will do everything I can to support Ms. Johnson in that work.

I intend my listening sessions as a step in systemizing community cooperation. I've talked with faculty at the Curry School about how Curry students might be able to contribute to that process. As I'm listening to families, I'll be paying attention to see if there are themes that emerge; research how other districts are successfully addressing common challenges; and work with the community to strengthen the support that is offered to CCS families. If I'm elected, Curry students in their capstone course will help me with that research and organization with community groups, so that it's not about me, one person listening to stories, it's about involving our whole community showing up for each other. (To be clear, this is not an endorsement of my candidacy by the Curry School, and I would love to involve other School Board members, as well. But I did reach out to faculty at the Curry School early in my campaign for their ideas on how we could better serve students and making community engagement a capstone project was one of the ideas that emerged.)

7. How will you hold the new superintendent accountable? How will you hold yourself accountable?

In his 100-day plan, Dr. Gurley identified clear actions he wanted to take in the areas of culture of care, student achievement, equity, and safe schools. He even included a little box where we can check off whether those actions were taken. I'm a process person, so I really appreciated this 100-day plan that has

accountability built in. I think it bodes well that he is a superintendent who appreciates the value of both clear goals and honest evaluation. Holding the superintendent accountable will be an ongoing conversation. As the COO of Strive, I have experience in evaluating whether an organization is achieving its goals and in course-correcting along the way.

For holding myself accountable, being as engaged with the community as I plan to be should provide a good, continuous reality check. I expect that folks will tell me when they think I've missed the mark on something.

8. Teachers and administrators said in the superintendent survey that they didn't feel included in decision-making. What can you do as a board member to ensure they are part of decisions? Along those lines, what can you do as a board member to ensure school employees feel comfortable speaking up about issues without fear of retaliation?

Listen to them without retaliating! When I started my campaign saying that I wanted to be available at regular, scheduled times for any member of the public to talk with me about our schools, I wasn't just thinking about parents and students. I was thinking about teachers, too. Over the past several years that I've been a CCS parent, I have heard numerous teachers talk about how they didn't feel they could give honest feedback within the district. I will listen, and I will work with our superintendent to solve the issues that keep teachers from feeling supported.

9. Do you support collective bargaining for school division employees? If so, why and what will you do to support collective bargaining? If not, why?

I strongly support collective bargaining for school division employees. Teachers should be able to advocate for themselves and doing so as a group is more effective. Teachers are fundamental to a healthy society, and it's time we start paying them like it. Virginia ranks last in the nation for teacher pay when compared to the average pay in our state. Fiftieth. In. The. Nation. Teacher pay in Charlottesville is higher than many other VA districts (so is our cost of living); I will do what I can to continue increasing teacher pay.

Part of that effort can include lobbying the state for more funding for teacher pay across VA. I have participated in Fund Our Schools events led by Legal Aid Justice Center and would plan to use my influence as an elected official to take an even more active role in their lobbying efforts.

10. Do you support the planned reconfiguration project? If yes, what will you do as a board member to ensure the project is started and completed, including the early childhood center? If not, why?

I do support continuing to pursue reconfiguration. As I've said elsewhere, though, it's not going to be enough as a School Board member to say that you support reconfiguration, you're going to need community organizing experience and experience with legislative advocacy. We are going to have to convince City Council, General Assembly, and our Charlottesville neighbors to vote for a tax increase. I do have that kind of experience, from my career and most recently in leading the community effort to build a playground at Walker Upper Elementary at students' request.

I've already begun talking with the frontrunners for City Council – Juandiego Wade and Brian Pinkston, [both of whom](#) endorse my candidacy – about how we need to strategize for funding reconfiguration. School Board will have to work closely with City Council, and I have the relational foundation to do so.

11. Do you support the associated tax increases — at least 5 cents — that city staff would be needed to pay for the project? Why or why not? What will do to educate the community about the tax increases?

We will have to raise taxes to pay for reconfiguration. It could be the real estate tax, the sales tax, or a combination. I can't say right now exactly which approach is the best one; we need more information about the projections for how different approaches would play out over the next decade and beyond to finance both the \$75m reconfiguration of Buford and the \$25m new preschool center. I do know that those who have the most wealth in our community should bear the brunt of the tax increase. For example, if we advocate that City Council raise the real estate tax, it is very important to me that we also lobby for an expansion of our real estate tax abatement program. There are some folks in Charlottesville who own a home that has appreciated in value, but they don't have the income to support a higher tax. I don't want them to be hurt by this reconfiguration that is supposed to promote equity in our community.

12. Reconfiguration could mean difficult budget conversations in the coming years especially as the school division weans itself off of the federal CARES and ARPA money. How will you as a board member approach the budget situation? Are you willing to cut the budget? What will guide your decision-making process as you assess the budget?

First, I want to come back to the idea that I believe School Board members can use their influence to advocate for more money to be distributed – from both the state and federal government – to our schools. At the same time, I recognize that is part of a long-term strategy, and the next School Board might have to reconfigure our budget as well as our schools.

A budget is a reflection of our priorities, and that would be my guide if faced with the responsibility to bring costs down. I would want to prioritize teacher and staff pay and programs that are most directly supporting equity in our schools. I try to make evidence-based decisions, so I want to see data demonstrating the effectiveness of programs we're funding. This includes qualitative data as well as quantitative. When I'm working on the budget, I'll be thinking about the stories and challenges I hear from the community and what is working for students and what isn't.

Emily Dooley

1. Why do you want to be on the Charlottesville School Board?

I am running for the Charlottesville School Board because I believe my experience in education will bring an important and missing voice to the board. I am a graduate of UVA's school of education and was a teacher and administrator in local schools for ten years. I have varied vested interests in the success of the

school division - my son is 4 and will start Kindergarten at Burnley Moran Elementary School next fall and my husband is a social studies teacher at Buford Middle School. The depth of understanding and level of expertise I have as a virtue of my time actually working in schools will allow me to hit the ground running to address the challenges facing our community.

2. What do you think qualifies you for a seat on the board? Why should someone vote for you?

My experience working in public education qualifies me to serve on the School Board. I have done the work of creating schedules, building curriculum and assessments, implementing intervention programs, and collaborating with community partners. CCS is entering an exciting time with a new superintendent, and a fresh perspective on the school board is necessary to capitalize on the opportunities for positive progress in the division.

3. Concerns about equity and achievement gaps have ramped up since the New York Times report in 2018. What does equity mean to you and what would a more equitable Charlottesville school division look like?

I believe that equity in the school division would look like all students having access to exceptional instruction that provides a variety of options for learning and displaying mastery of learning. As a school system we need to reduce the focus on high-stakes testing that is in itself rooted in racial inequities and instead focus our resources on ensuring that all students have access to high-level instruction that promotes problem-solving, critical thinking, and real-world connections. Ensuring that this type of rigorous instruction is available to all students is critical in addressing gaps that exist between groups of students. Furthermore, an equitable school system would provide expanded learning opportunities for our youngest learners.

4. What will you do as a board member to close the achievement gaps?

As a member of the school board, I would support division staff, administrators, teachers, and students in taking the 'leap of faith' that test scores will naturally follow if we engage students in this type of work. It's not that we're not assessing students and measuring growth, but we're assessing their critical thinking and analytical skills instead of the regurgitation of facts. As a board member I would support the work that has already been started by teachers of creating, implementing, and revising lessons utilizing inquiry design model & project based learning, which allows students to engage in relevant types of questions with real-world touchpoints.

5. Where do you think the division has fallen short in recent years? How will you address those areas as a board member?

I believe that there are opportunities to increase the involvement of teachers and staff in decision making and in providing for their well-being. I am interested in exploring some of the initiatives that surrounding districts are implementing that are working to give teachers more time for workdays and planning in this incredibly unconventional year. There are also opportunities to work to strengthen the relationship

between schools and the communities they serve through building engagement with families.

6. Part of the equity conversations often includes the phrase, “It Takes a Village.” How can the division move beyond that catching phrase and actually build partnerships with community groups that are more systemic?

Schools are increasingly being asked to provide services that go far beyond academics and budget limitations highlight the importance of community partnerships. Having clear and measurable objectives for the division is critical when collaborating with community partners so that ‘mission creep’ does not occur. Clear understanding and defined roles with partner organizations is important to make sure that all parties are working towards the same goals and outcomes. Defining the work, monitoring outcomes, and maintaining communication is the path towards successful partnerships. Authentic and lasting partnerships will come as we own the data, which involves celebrating our successes, but not hiding from areas where growth is still needed.

7. How will you hold the new superintendent accountable? How will you hold yourself accountable?

Accountability for the Superintendent comes from initially reviewing his goals and strategies and then evaluating progress at regular intervals. Additional accountability occurs in reviewing and creating the division budget to ensure that money is spent in support of personnel and programs that contribute to the progress of meeting said goals. I believe that accountability for a member of the school board requires similar articulation of goals and progress review. Accountability for both the Superintendent and board members can be achieved through a more transparent process so that the community can see where growth has occurred and where there is still work to be done.

8. Teachers and administrators said in the superintendent survey that they didn’t feel included in decision-making. What can you do as a board member to ensure they are part of decisions? Along those lines, what can you do as a board member to ensure school employees feel comfortable speaking up about issues without fear of retaliation?

As a former teacher, I am familiar with the feeling of frustration when left to implement decisions that I wasn’t involved in making and that felt removed from the realities of my work. It is critical that the board ensures teachers are heard by involving them early in conversations when there is still time for changes to be made. I support the use of focus groups to garner feedback in addition to actually spending time in schools to hear from teachers and administrators. The implementation of a 360 review where teachers are provided the opportunity to offer upward feedback to the superintendent is a way in which we can promote an environment where teachers are heard.

9. Do you support collective bargaining for school division employees? If so, why and what will you do to support collective bargaining? If not, why?

I support collective bargaining and I am excited by the opportunity to truly collaborate with teachers to create contracts that are creative in how they approach and work to solve ongoing pinch points like planning time, duties, pay, & benefits. Bringing these discussions into daylight may finally allow the

public to see just how hard teachers work and all of the responsibilities they carry. I think it will also result in better conditions and relationships that will only enhance and improve the student experience. Teachers being given superficial involvement or being brought into conversations late in the game has been an ongoing issue with the result often being teachers pitted against parents or the community. This is not helpful to anyone and I believe this can be alleviated by having honest, collaborative discussions early in policy-making conversations.

10. Do you support the planned reconfiguration project? If yes, what will you do as a board member to ensure the project is started and completed, including the early childhood center? If not, why?

I support the planned reconfiguration project and am happy to see it gaining momentum and moving forward, but I also recognize that we have to keep up the pressure to see it to completion--not just in the short-term, but also for the years to come to make sure that the expansion of pre-school opportunities is also made available in our community. I think that it's important that we not shy away from discussing the full cost of this project and to remember the expenses that are added to this project, and others, as a result of delay of implementation. The need for reconfiguration, including the expansion of preschool, will not lessen if we do not act nor will it get less expensive. The time to act is now. As a member of the School Board, I would work with our state representatives to introduce legislation in the General Assembly to allow for a sales tax increase to help provide funding.

11. Do you support the associated tax increases — at least 5 cents — that city staff would be needed to pay for the project? Why or why not? What will do to educate the community about the tax increases?

I support a tax increase to pay for reconfiguration, but I am mindful of the education needed to help the community understand the reasoning behind this change. The School Board, City Council, & city staff will need to work together to help citizens see the need for, and ultimate improvements from, this increase through community forums, publications, and neighborhood outreach. Additionally, we will need to work to ensure that property tax assistance is available to homeowners who cannot afford the increase. I'm uniquely positioned as an educator, but also as a Realtor, to advocate for the importance of this investment. I believe strongly that the quality of our schools matters regardless of whether one has a student enrolled or not. Public schools matter for one's property values, but more importantly, they matter because Charlottesville is a community that is built on the value of education and its public schools should reflect that.

12. Reconfiguration could mean difficult budget conversations in the coming years especially as the school division weans itself off of the federal CARES and ARPA money. How will you as a board member approach the budget situation? Are you willing to cut the budget? What will guide your decision-making process as you assess the budget?

Programs and spending need to have measurable goals for success and should have direct ties to division priorities. An accounting of where the division is allocating funds will be important as CARES and ARPA money runs out. We cannot continue to spend money on programs that are not successful just because

that's how something has always been done. There will be difficult decisions to be made, but continuing to spend on schools is critical and it will be important to focus on the "long game" -- if we make the investments now, we hopefully lessen the needs in the future. I am mindful of the fact that the vast majority of the school division's budget is dedicated towards its people through salary and benefits, and we are seeing that the needs of our school community are not lessening. Clearly communicating to state and federal representatives the realities and needs of our schools will be an important role of the school board.

Lisa Larson-Torres

1. Why do you want to be on the Charlottesville School Board?

As current chair and an incumbent, I bring solid experience and leadership to the board. I have demonstrated my commitment to being an advocate for every student and there is more work to be done. Putting 'equity' into action is a top priority of mine and I am vested and committed to continuing my work on this board.

2. What do you think qualifies you for a seat on the board? Why should someone vote for you?

My leadership, experience and accountability to every person qualify me for a seat on the board. During the past 4 years this board has taken great strides to address and tackle systemic racism and inequities baked into our school division. This is not easy work. It requires tough conversations and a willingness to be uncomfortable at times. I value all perspectives and have been active and outspoken in doing this work. The actions I have supported focus on the whole student at all times. I am accountable to the work at hand and also am willing to admit when or if I need to do better.

3. Concerns about equity and achievement gaps have ramped up since the New York Times report in 2018. What does equity mean to you and what would a more equitable Charlottesville school division look like?

It is critically important that CCS does not lose sight of what the NYT article reported. Every student should receive the support and instruction that they need to thrive and be successful. CCS can continue this work by removing barriers to access and truly meeting and seeing each student where he or she is. Creating and supporting a school climate that establishes relationships where students can feel trusted and valued each and every day. This is how I would describe equity and success within a school division.

4. What will you do as a board member to close the achievement gaps?

I will continue to prioritize the identification and removal of any and all barriers to achievement and opportunity as well as advocating for excellent literacy instruction beginning with the pre-K curriculum. I will support a budget that prioritizes instruction and programs that benefit our students equitably.

5. Where do you think the division has fallen short in recent years? How will you address those areas as a board member?

Our Equity committee continues to do excellent work. I look forward to having our dashboard presented and active so our division and our community can monitor strengths and areas of needed improvement. It's vitally important to be transparent and own the areas that are in need of more work - there's always room to do and be better.

6. Part of the equity conversations often includes the phrase, "It Takes a Village." How can the division move beyond that catching phrase and actually build partnerships with community groups that are more systemic?

CCS already has strong connections and relationships with many community partners. During the past almost 2 years, this community came together to support students and families. We partnered with new groups who helped to facilitate instructional spaces, partnered with groups to deliver food and feed our students and families and we continue to develop very close relationships with the health experts as we monitor and navigate COVID and the impacts that it has on students, staff and families. As we continue with the reconfiguration plans and see completion of our pre-K center that will also include systemic wrap-around services. The community partnerships with CCS are too many to name - they run deep and are a great example of how resource rich and committed this community is when it comes to the education and support of Charlottesville children.

7. How will you hold the new superintendent accountable? How will you hold yourself accountable?

Dr. Gurley laid out his entry plan and the board should receive updates and a final report of his observations and plan beyond that. As a board member, I will continue to support him and allow him time to evaluate the efficacy of programs. I anticipate receiving his recommendations for potential changes to better support the division in doing what is necessary for our students. I am accountable in my words and actions every single day- ultimately through policy and budgetary decisions.

8. Teachers and administrators said in the superintendent survey that they didn't feel included in decision-making. What can you do as a board member to ensure they are part of decisions? Along those lines, what can you do as a board member to ensure school employees feel comfortable speaking up about issues without fear of retaliation?

The board values administrators and teachers. Throughout our search and process of hiring a new superintendent it was very important to us to bring someone that embodied and had a track record of involving everyone in process and decisions. I am confident that Dr. Gurley will provide an environment for both teachers and administrators to be heard. Every voice and experience should be heard and already, just 3 weeks into his time here in the division, Dr. Gurley is creating the time and space for people to feel welcomed and to be heard.

9. Do you support collective bargaining for school division employees? If so, why and what will you do to support collective bargaining? If not, why?

Yes, I support collective bargaining for school division employees. As current chair I have already reached out to the current CEA and VEA representatives to initiate conversation. The board and superintendent should continue to meet to discuss how collective bargaining may look given that the schools do not have taxing authority. The collective value of employees, families and neighborhoods should be considered as we work to create a long-term vision for any structural changes employees may desire.

10. Do you support the planned reconfiguration project? If yes, what will you do as a board member to ensure the project is started and completed, including the early childhood center? If not, why?

Yes, I fully support the reconfiguration project. Updates and continued community engagement are imperative in maintaining momentum around this exciting project. I will continue to work with VMDO, the school leadership team and the city to ensure there is transparency around the funding strategies and impacts. It is imperative that the community understands the ultimate benefits for each and every student and why this can not be delayed any longer. I will continue to work with city and state level legislators to explore all funding options available. We have a green light on phase 1 of this project and I am equally committed to phase 2 which will include the early childhood center. This is where other funding options and strategies are imperative so there is minimal delay in getting the state of the art center started and completed.

11. Do you support the associated tax increases — at least 5 cents — that city staff would be needed to pay for the project? Why or why not? What will do to educate the community about the tax increases?

Yes, I support the proposed 5 cent tax increase as a method to pay for this project. I will actively provide and support any/all educational opportunities (written, verbal, in-person, virtual) to our community to ensure they understand the why's and also to receive their questions and concerns. I will also strongly advocate for continued tax relief programs for burdened community members.

12. Reconfiguration could mean difficult budget conversations in the coming years especially as the school division weans itself off of the federal CARES and ARPA money. How will you as a board member approach the budget situation? Are you willing to cut the budget? What will guide your decision-making process as you assess the budget?

As current chair, and one of seven board members, I am keenly aware of our current budget and need to re-evaluate what was funded by CARES/ARPA funds. I was proactive and added an additional early budget meeting this year anticipating some tougher than usual decisions. I trust the superintendent and his building leadership team to audit and assess program efficacy as related to our student and division priorities and needs. His recommendations will come to the board for further consideration. His

recommendations in conjunction with collective board input will guide us through this next budget season - ultimately reflecting and supporting our students.

Dom Morse

1. Why do you want to be on the Charlottesville School Board?

I'm running for Charlottesville City Schools to build a school system that works for every student and brings a community together to ensure student success. It's imperative we have a voice on the school board that understands the needs of students and has the experience of having gone through the system. To have healthy schools, we have to focus on the whole child — both inside and outside the classroom — and find ways to support our teachers to ensure they are successful too. That includes food access and nutrition, mental health services, teacher support, and citywide engagement.

The heart of my campaign is student voice and student choice. What that means is creating a healthy school environment that allows for students to be themselves, problem solve, innovate and explore their interests and identity in a productive and safe way. As a student, I wasn't given this opportunity to have a voice in my studies and I've made it the focus of my career as an educator.

2. What do you think qualifies you for a seat on the board? Why should someone vote for you?

Students, parents, and teachers want to know their elected representatives are working on their behalf. For me, that means showing up every day for my community as an active K-12 educator that can provide a representative voice for the educators in the classroom; showing up every day as a former student of Charlottesville City Schools with lived experience of the disparities the community still wants to be addressed; showing up every day to advocate and encourage parents to partake in the decision-making process, and most importantly, showing up every day to empower students to use their voice in the classroom as I advocate for instructional practices that provide more choice for students in every subject area and for every student overall.

3. Concerns about equity and achievement gaps have ramped up since the New York Times report in 2018. What does equity mean to you and what would a more equitable Charlottesville school division look like?

The 2009-2010 school year was my senior year at Charlottesville High School. I lived and witnessed some of the inequities we continue to speak about today. Those experiences included being in a cramped classroom and having friends not afforded the same access to advanced classes. The reality is that we have racial and economic disparities in Charlottesville where Black and Brown students, and low-income students, are disproportionately impacted by the way the system is currently set up. We have to focus on upending systemic inequities that limit and often erase the learning opportunities for students of color and kids who are economically disadvantaged. For example, this means continuing free meals for our schools

beyond the pandemic and improving the quality of our food to address a basic human need so that our students have the proper nutrition to actively participate in a rigorous education.

4. What will you do as a board member to close the achievement gaps?

To address achievement gaps, I want to create and strengthen partnerships with organizations like City of Promise, Abundant Life, Cultivate Charlottesville, and Jefferson-Madison Regional Library. As partners, we need to knit together our community resources to provide families with reading support before children get to pre-K programs to create the habit of reading, a culture of reading, and ownership of reading books representative of our student population. Working with community partners strengthens our ability to serve our students and ensure they have increased opportunities to show their capabilities today and in the future.

5. Where do you think the division has fallen short in recent years? How will you address those areas as a board member?

The division as a whole can do a better job empowering educators to innovate instructional practices. CCS has lost teachers to neighboring districts due to opportunities to try new practices. Talented professionals decide to leave to start their own schools or consulting firms, and program leaders are frustrated when their hard work to engage students in a different way is discouraged. As school board members, we can set expectations and goals through policy to encourage the exploration of new practices that empower teachers and students.

6. Part of the equity conversations often includes the phrase, “It Takes a Village.” How can the division move beyond that catching phrase and actually build partnerships with community groups that are more systemic?

There are a few things we can do to make sure every student has what they need. One, we need to create a new model of instruction so that we have a level of engagement with students with equity built into the model. And that must include social and emotional learning where students can explore their own interests and identities so they are fully embraced and find their voice. It also means supporting our teachers and allowing them to shape the curriculum and innovate in the classroom.

Second, there are a lot of families not engaged with the school district and we need to hear those voices and ideas. We have to create a culture that values every single person that interacts with Charlottesville City Schools. Part of the problem stems from the need for our school district to do a better job of building trust to strengthen citywide engagement. A lot of parents who have experienced educational trauma, such as myself, may have a history of voicing their concerns and being ignored. It can be difficult to advocate for students if there are barriers that place greater value on some families based on income while others are shut out of the process.

We have to meet people where they are, listen to the community more, and empower people to advocate for the changes they want to see. As a school board member, I will bring parents with me to school board

meetings, mentor families on the process of communicating with schools, hold monthly constituent meetings and work to create a plan that includes input from all community partners.

Lastly, we have to make sure that we close the gaps for those living on the margins by looking at the whole child. That means working with nonprofit partners to feed and house our students, finding ways to reduce poverty and address limited transportation, recognizing when youth are in crisis, and having supports in place to see a doctor and speak to a mental health professional. We have to be intentional in how we invest and prioritize funding so that we dismantle systems that oppress, alienate, and criminalize students.

7. How will you hold the new superintendent accountable? How will you hold yourself accountable?

I look forward to having an opportunity to work with Dr. Gurley as a school board member. It's our role to make sure that we engage the community, use our power to pass a budget that supports the superintendent's plan, and work together to move the district forward. As elected officials, it's also our responsibility to hold Dr. Gurley and the school division accountable because we were put in a position to act as a voice for the community and the next generation of students. It's always my aim to be compassionate and collaborative and never contentious if there's disagreement. I know that we're all on the same team of providing high-quality education for students.

I also know that I'd be graded on my performance as a school board member and I welcome constructive criticism from my constituents. If I'm not showing up or taking action on an important matter, I would want community members to call me in and point out where improvements can be made. My goal is to gain the trust of Charlottesville by working hard for every student, teacher, family, and community partner.

8. Teachers and administrators said in the superintendent survey that they didn't feel included in decision-making. What can you do as a board member to ensure they are part of decisions? Along those lines, what can you do as a board member to ensure school employees feel comfortable speaking up about issues without fear of retaliation?

As an educator, I know the challenges of this job. And it can be frustrating if our concerns are not being heard. Unfortunately, there is a drop-off rate in teachers around year three, and that often comes down to a lack of respect for the profession and leadership. We need to listen, learn and act across the board to improve working conditions and retain teachers. They cannot be brought in at the last minute when planning has already started. I will work with my colleagues to set up regular listening sessions with teachers to identify where and when we are failing them in decision-making. I will also work with the Superintendent and central administration to implement a system that prioritizes data collection on retention rates, exit surveys, and feedback from school personnel to see where we should be making improvements.

Additionally, no school employee should fear retaliation for speaking up. That is indicative of a toxic culture that will only lead to more employees leaving the district. We have to show up for teachers and

school personnel through the budget, professional development, mental health support, recognition, and reward.

9. Do you support collective bargaining for school division employees? If so, why and what will you do to support collective bargaining? If not, why?

Yes, I support collective bargaining and think Charlottesville should make this happen for all public employees. School employees should be able to advocate for the benefits they need, including being able to earn a living wage, negotiate contracts and improve professional development to retain high-quality teachers and school personnel. Collective bargaining provides an opportunity for the inclusion of educators' perspectives, school staff to be paid a salary they deserve, and improvement in working conditions. Students benefit from smaller class sizes and teachers who stay at one school long-term. In the end, our schools and city will benefit from collective bargaining for school division employees. I will gladly advocate making this happen in Charlottesville.

10. Do you support the planned reconfiguration project? If yes, what will you do as a board member to ensure the project is started and completed, including the early childhood center? If not, why?

Yes, I support reconfiguration.

Reconfiguration is an important step in updating facilities, but we also need to proactively move education forward with a model of instruction that works for students and teachers. Let's not forget how we got here in the first place. There were people in power who chose to let this neglect happen, therefore making a decision to disinvest in these students. That cannot happen and I won't let it happen as a school board member. As school board members, I believe we have the responsibility to advocate for additional state funds and connect private philanthropy to our school system in order to educate and develop strong leaders for the future that can advocate for themselves, their families, and the community as a whole.

11. Do you support the associated tax increases — at least 5 cents — that city staff would be needed to pay for the project? Why or why not? What will do to educate the community about the tax increases?

We need different tools to pursue this goal. I support Del. Sally Hudson's proposal to enact a 1% special sales tax at the General Assembly that will allow revenue generated to pay for school projects. Charlottesville would not be the first to do something like this as other localities have school-focused sales tax hikes.

Any discussion on a proposed real estate tax increase should also include options for tax relief, especially for residents aging in place and neighborhoods experiencing property value increases due to gentrification. I want to be clear that we cannot burden those who are already struggling with additional real estate taxes. That will lead to more displacement and housing insecurity, which leads to more trauma and adverse childhood experiences.

It's important for me to note that as a community, we must understand that the additional cost to renovate the buildings during reconfiguration is due to prolonged maintenance in the name of reconfiguration. The tax increase is another example of our city having to be reactive on an issue that was predictable. Real estate tax increases cannot be the only method of bridging funding gaps for our schools as our city works to address poverty and affordable housing for fixed-income homeowners and low-income families. We need a sustainable revenue source to upgrade school facilities and a lot of that advocacy needs to happen at the General Assembly, where we look at tax reforms, including with corporate entities.

12. Reconfiguration could mean difficult budget conversations in the coming years especially as the school division weans itself off of the federal CARES and ARPA money. How will you as a board member approach the budget situation? Are you willing to cut the budget? What will guide your decision-making process as you assess the budget?

Within the budget, my focus is on student-facing positions and properly funding positions where staff engage with students every day. That will help address the issue of staffing shortage and retention. Next, we have to continue to work through the reconfiguration process so Buford and Walker are not the only buildings receiving facility upgrades. Part of the solution is advocating at the General Assembly for dollars we need. Virginia provides little money to school divisions for school construction, leaving the burden on localities. It's a funding model that's not equitable and relies on our tax base.

We also need to conduct a financial audit of our entire school system and focus on values-based budgeting.

Leah Puryear

1. Why do you want to be on the Charlottesville School Board?

I am running for re-election because the students of CCS are amazing. I want to continue to serve Charlottesville students and families by providing them a high-quality educational experience. I furthermore can provide the institutional knowledge of our division, i.e., where we have been and where we need to go., I would like to make an impact on the whole child specifically their educational experience, I will continue the work of the preschool program, realigning our talented and gifted program, and building a strong support system for our stakeholders, students and families.

2. What do you think qualifies you for a seat on the board? Why should someone vote for you?

As the first African American women elected to the school board, I have been a strong advocate for equity and inclusion in our division. Being the first in a situation is not new to me but has afforded me the opportunity to pave the way for others and empower others to have a voice. As a former chair and vice chair of the board, I have seen this division struggle with equity and how to go about make the much-needed changes of inclusion. This includes developing and practicing health and wellness and

anti-bullying policies, developing and my continued work to build relationships of trust among our CCS families, students, and CCS staff.

3. Concerns about equity and achievement gaps have ramped up since the New York Times report in 2018. What does equity mean to you and what would a more equitable Charlottesville school division look like?

Equity to me, means inclusion. It is not just enough to have diversity but those diverse voices at the table, must be heard, listened to and included in the conversation. Our division has not shied away from equity, I worked to develop and implement our Equity and Inclusion work, voted to raise salaries of our frontline staff, voted to support the hiring of a more inclusive workforce. Now that these things are in place, I will continue to work on the retention portion of our equity efforts.

4. What will you do as a board member to close the achievement gaps?

We must recognize that all of us learn and develop at different rates, which means we all achieve at different rates as well. I will continue to assess the efficiencies of our intervention programs and best practices, to include standardized tests and student assessments.

5. Where do you think the division has fallen short in recent years? How will you address those areas as a board member?

Our division made great strides in hiring a more diverse work force, however, we have missed the mark in retention. We need to do a better job on our retention efforts of our African American staff. We must continue to provide relevant professional learning, updating policies that impact staff negatively, and provide mentorship support/experiences.

6. Part of the equity conversations often includes the phrase, “It Takes a Village.” How can the division move beyond that catching phrase and actually build partnerships with community groups that are more systemic?

Our division must look at our community partners and begin to look through an equity lens, are we asking the right questions to include staff, students and their support networks. The division must improve on its communication to all segments of our community, this can be done collaboratively with staff, students and their networks.

7. How will you hold the new superintendent accountable? How will you hold yourself accountable?

The hiring of Dr. Gurley is one of my proudest moments. Dr. Gurley has issued his 100-day plan and upon the end of that period, the board members will review the plan and evaluate his accomplishments. I will grow and support his plan by reviewing it monthly in order that I have a concise and objective comments upon the 100-day review with the entire. My first impressions of Dr. Gurley are that he’s an effective listener, approachable leader, and models his culture of care plan.

8. Teachers and administrators said in the superintendent survey that they didn't feel included in decision-making. What can you do as a board member to ensure they are part of decisions? Along those lines, what can you do as a board member to ensure school employees feel comfortable speaking up about issues without fear of retaliation?

I have always and will continue to have open lines of communication with employees of CCS, they have felt and will continue to feel heard, however, I feel this issue is much deeper. I will work toward creating a safe work environment and developing trust not only will employees be able to come to me with concerns but will also be able to speak within the organization, which will be building a culture of trust.

9. Do you support collective bargaining for school division employees? If so, why and what will you do to support collective bargaining? If not, why?

Many of our employees are currently members of the VEA, which we have historically had a successful partnership. In addition, they work with employee relation issues and have a presence on the division's equity council. I look forward to continuing that relationship and future collaborations.

10. Do you support the planned reconfiguration project? If yes, what will you do as a board member to ensure the project is started and completed, including the early childhood center? If not, why?

Yes, I do, and I have felt this way from the reconfiguration inception. Our division needs to have all grade levels in their respective buildings. Our early childhood programs should also be in one space. I have been an integral part of the instructional portion of the early childhood program, and we now need a physical space for these students to learn. These contiguous locations will continue to promote growth of learning. In addition, it will allow our community to have facilities worthy of our students. Having a new building in no way is a panacea to improving learning but will allow us to have facilities to facilitate the learning throughout our division.

11. Do you support the associated tax increases — at least 5 cents — that city staff would be needed to pay for the project? Why or why not? What will do to educate the community about the tax increases?

I support this increase and any other potential means of funding the reconfiguration efforts because this demonstrates our community's alliance to a high-quality education. It is imperative that we hold educational forums for our entire community to understand the process the funds identified for our schools will be used, which allows everyone to have a voice in this process.

12. Reconfiguration could mean difficult budget conversations in the coming years especially as the school division weans itself off the federal CARES and ARPA money. How will you as a board member approach the budget situation? Are you willing to cut the budget? What will guide your decision-making process as you assess the budget?

As a member of the school board, we have faced lean times. I will continue to prioritize initiatives that promote the health and safety of our CCS employees and students. My budget decisions will be made after adequately researching and reviewing the needs of our division. Our budget has always reflected the needs of our students and how our instructors can best accomplish the task at hand. I will continue to support a budget that reflects our strategic plan and best fiduciary practices.
