

Neil Seftor

What is the biggest issue facing JCPS right now, and how would you address it?

The budget crisis. JCPS has already cut around \$130 million, and those decisions about where cuts landed will affect classrooms, programs, and kids for years. My concern is that schools and the people who directly serve students have taken a harder hit than central administration. If elected, I'd push for honest, public accounting of how the cuts were distributed and make sure any future cuts go through that same scrutiny before the board votes.

What specific changes would you push for at JCPS if elected?

Three concrete things. First, a real budget transparency standard and regular public reporting that shows how resources are distributed school by school, so the board and the community can see whether classrooms were protected rather than just taking staff presentations at face value. That kind of reporting doesn't currently exist in any useful form. Second, an independent audit of how the budget cuts were actually distributed, including which schools and functions absorbed the most, and whether the burden fell equitably. Major decisions have already been made, but the board and the community deserve an honest accounting of what those decisions meant in practice, particularly for high-need schools. Third, superintendent performance goals set by the board, not the superintendent, with public reporting on whether they're being met. The board's job is to hold the administration accountable, and you can't do that without clear expectations established in advance.

What is your connection to the district?

I'm the parent of a current JCPS student at Noe Middle School and I want to make sure that he and the nearly 100,000 kids the district serves receive the best education possible.

What relevant experience in education do you have?

I'm an economist who has spent more than 25 years studying whether education programs actually work. I'm an Associate Director at NORC at the University of Chicago, a nonpartisan research organization, and my career has been built around evaluating whether programs produce real results for students. I've evaluated reading and math curricula, teacher development programs, college access initiatives, and large federal education programs. I spent more than a decade leading the What Works Clearinghouse, which is the federal government's main resource for evidence on what works in education. I know how to read data critically, ask the right questions, and tell the difference between real progress and a good-looking presentation.

What relevant business, budgeting, or financial management experience do you have?

My work has involved evaluating large public programs, some running into the hundreds of millions of dollars, to assess whether they're achieving their goals and whether resources are being used well. I'm not a budget officer, but I know how to read complex data, spot where numbers don't tell the whole story, and ask the questions that get past surface-level reports. That skill translates directly to board oversight of a \$2.35 billion institution.

JCPS has faced major budget challenges. What would you do to improve financial oversight and rebuild trust with taxpayers?

Be honest about what happened and what it will take to fix it. The district needs clear public reporting on how cuts were distributed. That means looking school by school and function by function, so the community can see whether classrooms were protected. Going forward, the board needs to set the terms for how resources are allocated and track whether those terms are being met, rather than approving whatever is put in front of it. That's what real oversight looks like, and it's the foundation for rebuilding trust.

How would you measure whether the superintendent is doing a good job?

Against goals the board sets, not the superintendent. That means specific, measurable targets set in advance. Those include things like student achievement growth, chronic absenteeism rates, how resources are distributed across schools, whether the budget is hitting its targets, and whether the district is retaining teachers, especially in schools that are hardest to staff. Progress needs to be reported publicly on a regular schedule. The board's job is to set those expectations, track them honestly, and have hard conversations when the numbers aren't there.

What do you believe JCPS should do to improve student achievement?

Start by being straight about where things stand. The latest state report card shows some genuine improvement. Graduation rates are up and chronic absenteeism is down, but 41 JCPS schools are now in the bottom 5% statewide, up from 34 two years ago. The district is getting better at the top and worse at the bottom. That's an equity problem that deserves more honest attention than it's getting.

On what the board can actually influence: four things matter most. First, JCPS recently made a significant shift moving from school-by-school curriculum choices to a single district-wide reading and math curriculum for the first time. That's a meaningful change, and we don't know the effects. The board needs to be asking hard questions about whether it's working and for which students, based on real data, and that's an area where my professional background is directly relevant. I've spent my career evaluating exactly this kind of question: does this program actually produce results? Second,

protecting instructional time. The research connecting time-on-task to student outcomes is about as solid as education research gets, and the board should be investigating whether students are getting the instructional time they're supposed to get. Third, teacher stability. Turnover hurts kids, especially in schools that were already struggling to attract experienced teachers. The budget cuts create real risk of losing more teachers, and the board needs to be watching that closely. Fourth, chronic absenteeism. Kids who aren't in school can't learn. The district has correctly made this a priority, but the board should be pressing for evidence that the specific approaches being used are actually working, not just that the overall number is moving.

The honest constraint is that some of the biggest factors, such as class sizes and school climate. That's part of why fiscal responsibility matters: it's the path to being able to ask taxpayers for what the district actually needs.

Is there anything else you want voters to know about you or your campaign?

I'm not a career politician. I'm a researcher who has spent 25 years examining whether public programs are actually delivering for the people they're supposed to serve. I'm running because JCPS is at a genuinely critical moment, facing a serious budget crisis, major changes to how the district is governed, and decisions about schools and programs that will shape this community for a long time. I think my background is directly relevant to what the board needs right now. I want this district to succeed, and I think I can help make that happen.