

Peoples Alliance-PAC Questionnaire for Durham

Board of Education 2020

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Candidate Name: Steven Unruhe

Address: 1011 Minerva Ave Durham NC 27701

E-mail address: steveunruhe4durhamschools@gmail.com

Phone: 919-495-7918

Candidate for District: At-Large

When answering this questionnaire, you may repeat the questions in your response document with their numbers as they are organized here or simply use this document to respond. Type your responses in a different font to distinguish your responses from the questions. PLEASE LIMIT YOUR RESPONSE TO EACH QUESTION TO 200 WORDS OR LESS. Thank you for your participation.

1. What do you think is the most pressing issue facing public K-12 education in Durham? How have you been involved in addressing that issue, and how will you continue to address that issue as a board member?

Our primary focus and most important issue is to increase student learning in the face of poverty and scarce resources. This work is critical to each of our students, individually, and to the future of our society. Learning, of course, ranges more widely and digs more deeply than what we test. It includes the arts, citizenship, compassion and mental and physical health. Our challenge, as a system, is to maintain focus while still addressing our many other compelling needs. Such a focus compels us to measure our goal of increased student learning using a standard of equitable outcomes for our children. The heart of education is a good educator with access to quality resources and positive physical space, supported by a good principal and administration. So it stands to reason that the path to increased student learning is through finding and retaining good educators and then supporting them. I dedicated my career to the classroom because that is the primary location of education, and I have dedicated my service on the board to sustaining that vision.

2. Pre-K: What is your vision for Universal Pre-K in Durham? Please include measurable goals and a timeline for expansion. Describe your understanding of DPS's role as a partner in this process.

My goal, and I believe the goal for our entire board and for the county commission, is QUALITY Universal Pre-K. This is an important distinction that is reinforced by data from cities across the country. It is also important because it speaks to slowing down the timeline, if needed, to ensure we are able to provide quality care. Our board, along with the county commission, is committed to providing universal quality care to four-year olds within the next several years. Quality care means providing trained teachers, strong leadership, and a robust classroom. One challenge, of course, is funding. I served on the Allocations Committee for Durham's Partnership for Children for three years - there has been zero increase in money from the state over that time. This pushes all of the financial load onto an already stretched county budget. But we are also already finding it to be a challenge to hire qualified teachers for these programs, and that challenge will only grow with time. Our primary task, as DPS, is to provide space in our buildings and training for Pre-K teachers. I hope that we will have the resolve to expand beyond four-year olds in the future, but for now covering all four-year olds is a worthy goal.

3. As a school board member, would you vote for a board resolution and lobby state legislators for a moratorium on approving more charters in NC and for allowing a pilot program for charters to become part DPS? Why or why not?

Moratorium - yes, absolutely. "Public" schools must serve the entire community, not just the families that attend a particular school. I am very much in favor of finding a way to bring several charter schools into DPS in the near future. I believe this is the long-term model that makes sense. It is critical, in my opinion, to distinguish between for-profit chains and independent, locally based charter schools. If we can eliminate the current framework of competition and replace it with cooperation and local accountability, I believe small, community-based charter schools can be helpful. By "accountability," I mean the local governing authority must have the power to determine whether to provide local tax dollars to a charter school, and must be able to require the school to meet local standards on such issues as racial balance and serving students with special needs. Within such a framework, community-based charter schools could help serve a growing student population, could provide a smaller setting that is attractive to some families, and could experiment with alternative instructional models, while still benefiting the community as a whole. While I strive to remain open-minded, I have to say that I am skeptical that for-profit chains can be brought into a productive relationship with local government.

4. DPS now has four schools operating under a community schools model. Describe what "community schools model" means? Do you think DPS should fund community schools expansion? Why or why not?

I love the community schools model. I strongly supported DAE's request for funding. I believe this is what a public school should look like: active parents

engaged with teachers and administration supported by a broad set of resources that promote physical and emotional health. I would love to see every one of our schools ready, willing and able to adopt this model. I do not, however, right now have a clear picture of a financial model for a broad expansion. We will need outside partners to help with funding, perhaps through the DPS Foundation. I am committed to working with DAE to build on our current schools and to develop the basis for expansion. I am particularly interested to see how the community schools model will work in some of our highest-poverty schools.

5. What percentage of DPS students are Latinx (described in NC public school data as “Hispanic”)? Describe ways that DPS can better recruit and retain Latinx principals, teachers and other school staff. What other supports do our Latinx students need and how can we fund those needs?

One third of our students are Latinx, and that percentage is growing. This has been a remarkable change over the past ten years. I am both very proud of the leadership of DPS and our board in support of Latinx students and families, and aware that there is a large gap between where we are and where I would like for us to be. DPS actively works to keep ICE out of our schools and to protect vulnerable families. The work of our teachers and students in support of Wildin Acosta is a story of national significance. We provide interpretation at all of our district meetings and many of our school gatherings. We translate our most important documents. We surpassed our first target for hiring Spanish speaking teachers and staff. We have expanded our bi-lingual elementary school programs. And yet, it is very clear that we need more interpreters (in languages other than Spanish as well), we need quicker turn-around for translation (also in other languages), we need more bi-lingual counselors, administrators and teachers, we need more community liaisons. And we need to do a better job of coordinating the work we already do. Our decision last year to separate the community and academic sides to this work has been helpful. Still, when I visit schools, it continues to be too common to see students and parents struggling to gain equal access to communication and resources because of language barriers.

6. What is restorative justice as practiced in Durham public schools? What is your assessment of how DPS is doing in rolling out restorative justice practice in our schools?

The goal of restorative justice is to replace a punitive model of discipline with a rehabilitation model. We need for our schools to be safe for students and staff. I believe, and a recent careful study confirms (<https://chalkbeat.org/posts/us/2019/01/04/the-first-gold-standard-study-of-restorative-justice-is-out-heres-what-it-tells-us/>), that working with students to address behavior is a more effective long-term path to improved safety than the traditional punishment-only approach. The community task force that examined our

discipline code and policies started us down the path of restorative justice. We have made remarkable progress in the reduction of suspensions (around 25 percent), and yet our racial disparities have not changed at all. We have begun training teachers and administrators in the restorative model. It is clear that some schools have made much more progress than others. It is frustrating, but not surprising, that it takes time to change entrenched practices.

On a related note, I am proud of the work DPS has done to address bullying in our schools. We worked with Bull City Schools United to institute a Day One Pledge to stand up to bullying, and we have trained teachers and students to identify and intervene to prevent bullying. While bullying continues to take place, especially towards LGBTQ students, we have made substantial progress.

7. Do you think Durham should have School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools? If not, please explain why not. If so, what do you think their role should be? What is your assessment of the MOU between the sheriff and DPS?

The argument to remove SROs from schools grows out of national data that shows that the presence of an SRO corresponds to a higher number of referrals to the criminal justice system. It is a strong argument. I would strongly support replacing SROs with a significant investment in counseling and mental health services, but given our current funding levels and restrictions in NC I don't see that happening in the near future. In my experience as a teacher, I found that many staff, students and parents feel safer when an SRO is placed in a school. We live in a violent, highly weaponized society, and schools are often the safest place in the lives of many of our students. So, for the present, I support keeping SROs in our schools. I do believe that the recently revised MOU with the sheriff clarifies roles and responsibilities and also provides for school-led training that will improve the relationship between SROs, students and families, and decrease referrals to the criminal justice system.

8. What is your plan for reducing racial disparities in suspensions in DPS?

The board and administration have set a five year goal within the Strategic Plan to reduce over-all suspensions by half (to under four percent). The very first step, which has engaged all of our schools, has been to "identify practices that are producing disproportionate suspension rates...." Our Office of Equity Affairs is training administrators and teachers on implicit bias. We disaggregate suspension data for every school. I believe we are making progress, and I believe we can do better. When I taught journalism, my students would often document the differences in how administrators and teachers interacted with black and white students. From what I have seen, our staff is now more aware of this kind of implicit bias, but it has certainly not disappeared. It is helpful to bear in mind that we operate within a social system that exhibits racial disparities in housing, employment and the criminal justice system. This hampers the progress

that we can make in our schools even with the best intentions and effort. Still, our task is to address our own issues. We are making our data open and transparent, and we are holding ourselves accountable for making progress. I am hopeful.

9. Do you support the Board of County Commissioners providing a recurring building maintenance fund for DPS properties? If not, why not. If so, what kind of formula would you use to calculate the yearly amount?

Yes. Yes. Yes. We should have had this in place years ago. I have pushed hard, and will continue to push hard, for a substantive increase in county capital funding. The use of bond money to pay for maintenance makes no sense. I am not sure of a specific formula, although I am considering asking the county to conduct a comparative analysis between maintenance spending for school buildings versus other county facilities.

10. If you are a current board member, describe the process you used this past year to evaluate the Superintendent and comment on whether you think it is effective in getting honest feedback from parents, teachers and principals. If you are a new candidate, what kind of evaluation of the superintendent would you like to use? How would you ensure that you got honest feedback from principals, teachers and parents?

I was frankly appalled at the evaluation instrument and process in place when I was elected to the board. Based on the state teacher evaluation instrument (which is itself already terrible), there was little relevance to the superintendent's actual work. I found the assessment superficial and often trivial. We have adopted a much simpler instrument that has led to deeper and more honest conversation and assessment of the superintendent's performance. I am not sure the evaluation process itself is the best method to gain information from parents, teachers and principals. I worked to get DPS to adopt a 360-evaluation process and it became so formalized that I found it useless. I think the board's job is to be in conversation with people inside and outside the system so that we go into the evaluation process already aware of the perception of the superintendent. Speaking for myself, I visit schools frequently, I work to stay in touch with DAE leaders and representatives, I meet often with parents and community groups. I have confidential relationships from my career in DPS that helps to inform my assessment as well.

As a member of the current board, I sought a superintendent who had a clear sense of how to advance student learning, and I have worked to keep this issue front and center. I don't believe standardized tests provide meaningful evidence of student learning, but I do agree with the superintendent that raising test scores is a necessary step in changing the perception of DPS. I believe that, while we

have a very long way to go, we have made significant progress in student learning over the past several years.

11. What is your current involvement in and personal work regarding using a race equity lens in making decisions? If you are a current board member, please offer an example from board decision-making. If new candidate, please offer an example from a personal or professional experience.

I believe our current board, individually and collectively, strives to look at every decision we make through a race equity lens. By this I mean that we do not operate in a vacuum. We acknowledge the historical and social-economic factors that adversely impact families of color, and we actively address these issues as we make decisions. I will give four examples. First, within our curriculum adoption process, a diversity of materials is one of our top priorities, even though it is not even a category used in national curriculum standards. Second, within our hiring, although we want to hire many more African-American and Latinx teachers, we have made great strides in the diversity of our principals and leadership team. Third, we have invested significant funds to bring our custodians back under our system so that they receive benefits and we can raise their base pay, and organized our transportation system so that bus drivers work enough hours to receive benefits. Both of these jobs are largely filled by people of color. Finally, the board itself works across racial lines to set policy and to advocate for Durham's schools. (For readers relatively new to Durham, I will simply state that this has not always been true).

12. What is your knowledge about the current issues regarding school under-enrollment and overcrowding and your perspective on what principles should guide redistricting?

The placement and size of Durham's schools is out of sync with the last 30 years of development. We have under-enrolled schools in the north with little prospect of development to fill them. We have very over-enrolled schools in the south, east and west. The state's restrictions on K-3 class size is a good idea educationally but is straining our facility capacity. Our administration has put together an in-depth model showing our facility needs over the next ten years. Changing boundary lines will be necessary but not sufficient. Durham clearly needs two new elementary schools in the south, followed by a new middle school. My only personal guideline going into this process is Keep It Simple. I believe diverse schools are better schools, and I will seek a plan that to the extent possible creates school populations that mirror our over-all demographics. At the same time, from my experience I believe elaborate plans tend to erode trust and confidence; I prefer plans that are easy to understand and straight-forward to implement.

13. Is local operational funding of our schools too high, about right, or too low? Please explain your response.

Is this a trick question? Can anyone seriously argue that we have sufficient operational funding? We live in NC where we provide less operational funding per student than we did ten years ago. Durham is a city with a national identity. We need schools with resources comparable to our counterparts across the country. We currently are not even close. We need greater state and federal funding, of course, and we need to also look at ourselves and support education at a competitive local level. The most recent Leandro report noted the many ways that NC falls short in providing even a basic education - we cannot allow Durham's children to be left in such neglect simply because our state leaders fail to act.

I will note that we have been able to gain a substantial increase in county funding over the past couple of years. Much of this is due to strong community support, including much work by PA. I think several years of intense reworking of our budget to make it much more open and transparent helped give our requests credibility that was lacking in the past. This was a primary focus for me during my first term.

Personal Information:

1. Please describe your educational background, noting any degrees and honors you have earned. (Skip if resume included)
I have a BA in History of Science from University of California Santa Cruz. I received my mathematics teaching certificate after completing coursework at North Carolina Central University. I was granted the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching, and I was granted a lifetime achievement award from the Journalism Education Association.
2. Do you have children? If so, where do they, or did they, attend school?
I am married to Jennifer McGovern. Both of our girls graduated from DPS. Molly lives in Texas and has two boys. The oldest is in kindergarten in the San Antonio public schools. Katie lives here in Durham, teaches in DPS, and has a one-year old daughter.
3. Please describe your adult employment history (skip if resume included)
I taught in DPS at Northern and Riverside for 29 years. Before that I worked as a bread baker at Ninth Street Bakery (when it was on Ninth Street). I am now a member of the school board.