FCSB Candidate - VOICES of Fairfax Questionnaire

Dear School Board Candidate -

VOICES of Fairfax is an organized group of concerned citizens who are closely following the School Board races. We have identified you as a candidate running for either an At Large position or as a representative of your district. Our group would like to hear from you on some important questions below. Please respond to these questions no later than August 30th with your complete answers.

We are sending this questionnaire to ALL candidates running for a position on the Fairfax County School Board.

We will post all answers received on our website - www.voicesoffairfax.org - and may follow up on one or more. Once we have received your answers to these questions, we will give you the opportunity to review and sign our Candidate Pledge supporting our community priorities.

Thank you for your time and interest in representing our communities!

Your full name *

Tom Wilson

What is your position on the proposed change to School Board Policy 8130.8 that was presented to the school board on July 22nd, 2019? *

View proposed changes here:
https://go.boarddocs.com/vsba/fairfax/Board.nsf/files/BDZRXU6E7FD2/$file/20190711_Draft_Policy8130_REDLINE.pdf

I am opposed to both how these changes were made and the changes themselves. I will specifically address the area in the document that discusses "considerations" for boundary adjustments and mentions "socioeconomic or racial composition" of students as the first consideration. This is the part of the document that is understandably getting the most attention. For one thing, it is not really clear what this means. I believe the public is right to be alarmed that this could mean almost anything, depending on who is in charge of the school system. The policy does not explain what composition is ideal or how that composition would be achieved. It is also true that in 2019 many of our students are not one thing or another. We have a large population of students who could check "other" when it comes to racial composition, and I suspect this population will only get larger as time goes on. My own daughter, who is from China, is being raised by my family, and we are Caucasian. Is she Asian, Caucasian, or other? Is her genetic make up or her environment most important to FCPS? Why are we focusing so much on the color of people's skin? I also think we have to respect where people choose to live. For many families, the schools their kids attend become part of the fabric of their lives. This is very important when you live is a sprawling suburban area that can be very isolating. We need to have a very compelling reason to make drastic changes to communities, such as changing their school boundaries. This document does not reflect that.

How will One Fairfax affect your decisions as a school board member? *

I will prioritize neighborhood schools because I believe that neighborhood schools help parents and students participate more in the life of the school. It is preferable if we have fewer buses on the road rather than more, and it is preferable if the children in a neighborhood know each other well. Ideally, our schools, particularly at the elementary school level, should be at the heart of a community. One Fairfax does not change these priorities. I am not saying that every school in FCPS is the same and that I do not care if some students are doing more poorly than others. It is definitely not the case that we, as a school system, have never taken an interest in this problem of the academic achievement gap. The achievement gap has been on ongoing concern of this current School Board and many, many School Boards before this one. Just because now we have "One Fairfax" does not mean that nobody was concerned about inequality before 2019. The public should realize that we are already doing many things to provide services and programs where they are needed. We have Head Start classes in some communities and not others. We have lower student teacher ratios already in place in certain schools. Some schools have a "School Pantry" where students can pick up supplies such as feminine hygiene products, soap, or even food. We do attempt to address problems at "failing" schools. One example of this is a program called "Project Momentum." This program has had good success turning around schools with failing test scores. These are just a few of the many examples I could give. We cannot use "One Fairfax" as an excuse for policy makers and politicians to do whatever feels good, sounds good, or scores political points with their constituencies. This will lead to more wasted resources and programs that do not work. We need to do what works! Our kids are counting on us.

How should racial and/or socioeconomic diversity influence establishing or changing school boundaries? *

My short answer is, I don't know. My longer answer is, let's find out. There are already several current examples of schools in Fairfax County where there is a mix of socioeconomic and racial diversity. One that I can think of right away is South Lakes High School. Reston was intentionally planned to have low income housing mixed in with higher priced homes. South Lakes reflects that diversity. This is not the only example. There is an elementary school in my district with about 200 lower income, Hispanic children attending a school in an affluent area. Wherever there are examples like these, we should study them! FCPS has the experts on staff who are capable of determining how well students are performing in various situations. We can look at test scores, but we can also survey families. Do the Hispanic families whose children are being bused over to a neighborhood they do not live in like the situation, or would they prefer that their children attend a school closer to home? We could look at other factors too, such as attendance. Another idea would be for FCPS to collaborate with colleges and universities, such as George Mason, and have researchers look at some of these questions. We need to quantify, whenever possible, what the benefits or the negatives are to intentionally changing boundaries to create more racial and socioeconomic diversity. Only then will we really know how much influence this should have on our decision making process in regards to school boundaries. My suspicion is that we do not actually have great data showing how successful this type of integration has been. If we did, I think that the leaders of FCPS, in coordination with the majority of the current School Board members, would have been publicizing this information widely. In summary, let's make decisions on this and other matters based on data. Let's do what works!

Is there a way to change the CIP process so that it can be more responsive to increases in school enrollment? *

Whatever process the School Board adapts, it should follow it. Otherwise, what is the point of even having a process about this or anything else? Secondly, yes, there are always ways to be more responsive to changes in school enrollment. However, being more responsive may come with a price, and that may be getting rid of time for public comments and input. One reason changes to boundaries take so long is that changing boundaries is a big deal for a community. In general the School Board members would be wise to pay more attention to changing demographics rather than a lot of the political nonsense that we do now. Then perhaps we would not be so surprised to see enrollment go up or down. Their view should be in the short term but also the long term...years, even decades, down the road. This is part of the job the public is entrusting to the School Board. I think the presence of so many trailers at our school buildings is testament to the fact that previous School Boards did not work together adequately with the Board of Supervisors to plan for the future growth in Fairfax County.