



Questionnaire for School Board Candidates Seeking Endorsement

Fairfax County Democratic Committee—2023 Elections

Please return to FCDC electronically by email to your [filing point of contact](#) when you file your other filing materials and no later than 5 pm on April 6, 2023.

Name: **Ryan McElveen**

District or At-Large: **At-large**

Provide a brief background statement that demonstrates why you believe you are best suited to serve on the Fairfax County School Board. This should include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Why you decided to run for this office
- Your professional, educational, and public service background
- Your background in education (as a student, teacher, staff, etc.)
- Any personal connections to Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS)
- What you believe the role and responsibility of a School Board member to be

I am a lifelong supporter of public education and have strived to live a life of service to my local and global community, from my youth as a Boy Scout, student government leader, and education activist to my adulthood as a local elected official, community education nonprofit founder, and global think tank administrator.

I was raised by a father who began his career in public schools in 1960 and taught 8th grade English at Kilmer Middle School until the age of 82 and a mother who was the first female editor of Nation's Business magazine. My wife, Xuan, is a Chinese teacher at Sidwell Friends School in Washington. As an FCPS student, I attended Westbriar Elementary, Kilmer Middle and Marshall High Schools. It was in our schools, working with peers from around the world and serving as president of the class of 2004 at Marshall that I grew to love and respect the many kinds of diversity that our public school system offers. I saw how that diversity prepares our students to become global citizens and active participants in a Democratic society.

As a School Board member from 2012-2019, I worked with parents, students, and educators to keep the school system the best in the nation, fighting to attract the best educators and leading the School Board as legislative liaison to ensure that Fairfax County's voice was heard in Richmond. My accomplishments as a Fairfax County School Board member have had national implications:

- The resolution I drafted on gun violence prevention became a national model for school boards.
- The civic engagement policy I developed was a first of its kind in the nation and later became a Virginia state law.
- And the pathbreaking nondiscrimination protections I implemented for LGBTQIA+ community members paved the way for other school districts to follow.

These achievements show that I am an innovator with the vision to create and transform policy on behalf of those who often lack a voice at the policymaking table. I have led the charge to improve student life by:

- improving student mental health programs;
- creating fresher, healthier school food;
- expanding LGBTQ nondiscrimination protections – the first such protections in the state of Virginia;
- reforming student discipline policies;
- pushing for improved curriculum internationalization and world language education;
- implementing later high school start times and full-day Mondays;
- pioneering sustainability initiatives like solar on the schools and reducing plastic waste;
- enhancing college and career access;
- championing gun violence prevention – authoring a resolution adopted by boards around the nation;
- human trafficking prevention;
- improving school safety and security;
- reforming the dress code;
- increasing community accountability and transparency by hiring a system ombudsman and an auditor general;
- supporting name changes for schools named after confederate figures; and
- allowing excused absences for students participating in civic engagement activities – the first program of its kind in the nation.

After leaving the School Board, I founded the “Global Leaders of Fairfax County” program to help prepare high school seniors to become leaders in the community and the world. I also currently serve as advocacy chair of the Churchill Road Elementary School PTA and co-leader of Girl Scout Troop 50292. In my professional life, I serve as associate director of the John L. Thornton China Center at the Brookings Institution.

I am running for School Board again because I believe strongly in the power of public education to transform people's lives, and I want to continue working with our community to ensure that our schools live up to the promise of serving every child – including my two daughters, Sierra (6) and Isla (1) – so they can reach their full potential.

Answer the following questions. Please try to limit responses to each question to no more than half of a single-spaced page.

1. Please list and explain your top five priorities if elected.
 1. **Provide high-quality mental health resources that meet our students and staff where they are**
 2. **Competitively compensate and retain high-quality educators who knows our students by name and by need**
 3. **Build and maintain educational environments and facilities that are safe, inclusive, healthy, sustainable, and inspire learning**
 4. **Offer 21st century curriculum, academies, and high-quality world language programs in every school to prepare students to thrive in the jobs of the future**
 5. **Implement universal high-quality pre-K programs that prepare students to enter kindergarten ready to learn**

2. Over the last few years, there has been increased scrutiny on public schools. Concurrently, nationwide we are seeing attrition among teachers and staff at exceptionally high levels and unusually high numbers of teachers terminating their contracts mid-year. How can we ensure that FCPS operates in a way that attracts and retains a robust, exceptional, and diverse teaching and administrative force?

Our teachers are unquestionably our most important asset. Having a wife who teaches and a father who taught in FCPS for many years, I understand the myriad struggles our teachers face and the need to restore the respect of our society for the education profession. To address our ability to attract and retain a robust, exceptional, and diverse teaching and administrative force, I will focus on five issues:

1. Employee compensation – We must compensate teachers at a level that recognizes their contributions to society. FCPS, like districts nationwide amid the national teacher shortage, is struggling to attract teachers, particularly in specialized fields, and it is critical that we retain the teachers in whom we invest.

2. Building improvements – We must address our capital budget, which impacts the environments in which our students and employees work, learn, eat, and play. Our backlog of renovations and preventive maintenance is one of our greatest challenges. We must work to increase the county’s school bond allocation.
 3. Working Conditions – We must provide teachers with useful professional development that lets them to hone their skills, provides unencumbered planning time, and allows the autonomy to make their classrooms come alive.
 4. Class sizes – Class sizes have reached a tipping point, and it’s time to reevaluate the class size regulation.
 5. Instructional programs – We will need to successfully implement the new strategic plan without increasing teacher workload. Instruction is where our teachers help Fairfax stand out from other school districts, and we need to ensure that teachers retain the autonomy to engage in project-based learning that embraces the four Cs (critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity) while pushing back against federal and state pressures to teach to standardized tests.
3. Fairfax County Public Schools serves over 180,000 students from diverse backgrounds including religious and ethnic minorities, LGBTQIA+ students, students with disabilities, profoundly gifted students, twice exceptional students, and students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. How will you ensure that every FCPS student is “met by name and by need?”

Several years ago, FCPS transitioned to become a majority minority system, which brings an even greater responsibility to ensure that everyone member of the community — no matter their background — feels represented, respected, and loved.

School Board members need to show not just through their words, but through their actions, that they embrace inclusion. I have consistently done just that.

- When our LGBTQIA+ community came under attack, I made sure that our nondiscrimination policy included them.
- When the federal government sent non-English speaking refugees to Fairfax County, I joined with colleagues to create newcomer academies to focus on intensive English education but also allow for English learners to learn alongside students of other backgrounds in mainstream and elective classrooms.
- When we had the opportunity to shape the Ignite strategic plan, I successfully pushed to include workforce diversity goals.

- When former Liberty University President Jerry Fallwell, Jr., threatened violence against Muslims, I authored a board letter to request that VHSL not host events there.
- And finally, when opponents targeted needs-based funding, I worked to ensure increased funding where student needs are greatest.

We must do better to support our students with disabilities, twice exceptional students, and profoundly gifted students – programs for whom have strengths but also pervasive weaknesses. The weaknesses stem from the fact that robust curriculum and pedagogical practices have not spread equitably throughout the system and, as a result, have left many students without access to the benefits of those programs. We need to provide them access to environments – in some cases specialized schools or academies – where they can blossom.

4. While the school board is a nonpartisan role, in the current political climate, public education has been subject to a great deal of partisan politicization and FCPS has seen a great deal of national media coverage. Are you prepared for this? How will you manage this both professionally and personally?

In 2015, I led the successful effort to change the nondiscrimination policy of Fairfax County Public Schools to protect community members from discrimination based on gender identity. The change led our district to become the first in the state to offer this kind of protection. At the time, this undertaking garnered national headlines, in part because it occurred on the leading edge of a national movement attacking the rights of the transgender community and pushing many other jurisdictions to drop their efforts to provide similar protections. Although we faced backlash in Fairfax, we persisted and were successful, in large part because it was the right thing to do.

In recent years, discord has also been rising over the inability of political leaders to substantively address white supremacy, gun violence, and climate change. As a result, young people have turned to social media to amplify their voices and mobilize their followers to act. The aftermath of the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, witnessed students around the country organizing protests and moments of silence. In response, some school districts supported the first amendment rights of students; other districts punished them. I recognized the need to systemically change how American school systems support students across the political spectrum who are eager to be civically engaged. I proposed and we passed a policy — a first of its kind in the United States — allowing students to receive an excused absence to participate in civic engagement activities. The following year, the Virginia General Assembly enacted a state law modeled after that policy, so now all Virginia students have that same right.

These experiences taught me the importance of filtering out the noise and focusing first and foremost on supporting the needs of our families, students, and staff.

5. What challenges need to be overcome for FCPS to close opportunity and achievement gaps in accordance with the One Fairfax policy framework?

As a result of having such a large and complex system with demographic changes beyond its control, FCPS has evolved into a tale of two counties. One of the biggest fallacies perpetuated in America today is that “failing” public schools are the result of failing school systems. However, failing schools are not the product of school systems alone — they result from social forces beyond the control of school systems pushing schools past socio-economic tipping points. FCPS has 42 schools with poverty rates above 40 percent (up from 34 in 2012), and more than half of our elementary schools sit above the socio-economic tipping point, showing that Fairfax has moved beyond localized poverty.

To address this divide, the School Board must maintain its long-standing practice of targeting these communities with needs-based funding. During my eight years on the School Board, I was a strong supporter of the Opportunity Neighborhoods community schools pilots that co-located schools with human and health services. This model is ripe for expansion in the many areas of need throughout our county.

The program that can have the greatest impact on achievement gaps is universal pre-Kindergarten. Despite years of lip service to the importance of early childhood education, the county has not made the necessary investments to ensure all children have access to pre-K. Studies have shown that for every \$1 we invest in high quality early childhood education we get \$7 back in savings to society. Universal Pre-K is not just a moral and pedagogical imperative — it is a fiscal imperative, too.

6. What are some things you want to learn more about that can help you serve the school division?

I propose convening a commission on pandemic response and preparedness to assess how FCPS handled education during the pandemic – including virtual learning, social-emotional support for students and staff, and logistical response – and provide lessons learned for the future. We owe it to the community to provide transparency into the successes and failures so that we can learn from this unprecedented experience.

7. Members of the School Board are expected to engage with and take input from students, parents, teachers, and other community members. How would you stay connected with the school community to ensure FCPS’s governance is in line with community priorities?

The past decade has brought the greatest communication advancements in human history. When my colleagues and I first took office in 2012, we confronted a system

with antiquated constituent feedback mechanisms that could not meet the demands of constituents who expected 24/7 responsiveness.

We rose to that challenge and improved our communication mechanisms. The first initiative I undertook as a Board member in 2012 was to push for the Board to accept public testimonies via YouTube, allowing community members to share feedback at the Board's regular business meetings from the comfort of their home. We were the first governing body in the country (if not the world) to offer this option, which continues to be an effective engagement mechanism today.

In 2013, we also instituted School Board member newsletters, which have allowed Board members to communicate directly with their constituents and receive feedback through email. The Board also implemented countywide listening tours, which have been well-received by the community. I hosted annual "Advocacy and Innovation Workshops" for our high school students so that they could be prepared to successfully advocate for their desired policy changes.

Finally, our efforts to engage with constituents via social media and crowdsourcing of ideas offer the greatest area for growth. I was the first School Board member in history to engage deeply with our community through social media, which allowed for me to hear new ideas from community members (like the support dress code reform) and bring them to the Board. I look forward to continuing – and innovating on – this constituent-centered approach to communications.