



## **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: **Melanie Meren**

District or At-Large: **Hunter Mill District**

***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

*Please see below*

**Background statement by Melanie Meren:**

I believe that strong schools make a strong community. The students, families, staff, and residents of Hunter Mill and Fairfax County deserve to be represented by an experienced public servant like myself, who improves access to opportunities for all students in FCPS to fulfill their destinies for success; strengthens public policy that frames how FCPS uses public resources to reflect its values; and fosters trust, civility, and respect in public service during a turbulent time in American democracy.

I have been honored to serve as the elected representative of the Hunter Mill District on the Fairfax County School Board, since being elected in November 2019, and sworn in to begin serving on January 1, 2020. Nine weeks after I began, the global pandemic changed every aspect of the job I was sworn to do. Decisions about public health - truly, matters of life and death - were put "squarely into the laps of school boards" in Virginia, per directions from Governor Northam. During the pandemic it was difficult to address the platform of ideas I had campaigned on in 2019, to advance public education aligned with Democratic values. Moreover, unimagined challenges and opportunities arose regarding equity and meeting students' needs.

As we have come to learn how to live with COVID, I have focused more on those critical academic and school division matters that are the true purview of the School Board, including:

- **Instituting the Equitable Access to Literacy instructional plan**, for which the School Board approved funding for FCPS-wide alignment of curriculum and educator training in the science of reading instruction. I championed this adoption in FCPS as well as the bi-partisan Virginia Literacy Act that passed in 2022.
- **Installing outdoor classrooms in every school**, an initiative I worked on beginning in 2021, that in upcoming FY 24, will include \$6 million in funding to install such spaces to accessible and safe specifications so students can obtain the research-proven benefits of learning outside, and engage in environmental science content. This includes stipends for a staff member in each of nearly 200 schools to spearhead management of this space, and also funding for educator professional development to maximize this instructional resource.
- Using results from **Board-directed studies** about **advanced academic instruction and twice-exceptional students ("2e")**; **special education**; and non-core academic instructional offerings, including **world language and arts education**, to make **funding decisions** that expand access to these opportunities.
- **Hiring a new Superintendent in 2023** to lead this 11th largest school division in America that has an annual budget of \$3 billion to educate 180,000 students and employ 45,000 adults. Dr. Michelle Reid was the National School Board Association's 2021 National Superintendent of the Year. Thus far she has received stellar remarks from community members and families across the county, and is about to announce a new strategic-plan based on months of intensive engagement.
- **Retaining our workforce** via Board-approved compensation increases with across-the-division pay raises, and particular increases to bring pay parity to elementary school principals, special educators, instructional aides, school bus drivers, and substitute teachers. I just recently voted to approve **collective bargaining**, giving employment rights to staff for the first time in Fairfax, ever.

- **Policy-making that:**
  - Reinforces the work of **school librarians** to offer materials that meet the needs of students and reflect a global, diverse society, per Regulation 3009.
  - **Reinforces and protects equity, respect, and safety:**
    - Updates **discipline policy** annually to be less punitive and biased, and more effective.
    - Established Policy 2625 to **prohibit the use of restraint and seclusion of students**.
    - Established Policy 1445, "**Trust Policy**", to ensure FCPS families feel comfortable that their personal information will not be shared with immigration officials.
    - Reinforced **Regulation 2603 for students' rights for gender expression**, which gives transgender and gender-expansive students agency in expressing and declaring (or not) their gender identity and sexual orientation.
  - **Commits to climate change mitigation:**
    - Champions **Net-Zero** design standards for all-new buildings, and Net-Zero-ready for renovations - adoptions that I championed.
    - Adopts contracts to use renewable energy, including installing solar on schools and increasing electric school buses in the fleet.
    - Ensures cross-division alignment and implementation with environmental protection and sustainability goals - through the current holistic review of **all** transportation and facilities in which I'm participating.

Returning to the School Board will allow me to continue advancing this body of work to bring further results to Hunter Mill residents and all in Fairfax County. The relationships I've built in the community and within FCPS are a unique asset I will carry with me in a second elected term.

I believe that the role of a School Board Member is to set policy. Then, the Board holds the Superintendent accountable for implementing that policy, according to public evaluation measures. The Board hires and retains the Superintendent; approves the \$3 Billion budget annually; and presides over student and employee discipline matters that have risen to the level of appeal, as well as legal and financial matters of risk and weight.

**With at least seven School Board Members not returning to the FCPS Board in 2024, it is critical that my experience on the Board remain** to help orient new Members, and build the new Board team alongside them. Furthermore, **I am the parent of two FCPS students** - a 7th grader and a 4th grader. As one of the few Board Members or candidates who have children in the school division after this June, it is vital for the Board to include the voice of current parents who have a view into the challenges and opportunities facing students, families, and educators.

I've held a lifelong track record for promoting public education. After earning my Masters in Public Policy from Duke University in 2002, I began my dream job - working in the U.S. Department of Education in Washington, at the dawn of the implementation of No Child Left Behind. I worked in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, specializing in early childhood education and programs for Title I students - students facing the most disadvantages. I've been an **advocate** for public education since the 1990s. But more than an advocate, I am a **professional in education policy**, and in **communications and organizational operations**.

And that's the thing about the School Board - our schools need more than advocates who love our schools - they need professionals who can dig in and do the work. There are already two Republican opponents in Hunter Mill who are campaigning against me. These Republican attacks are not new to me - I've defended and overcome the distractions that have mounted during the COVID era. I have the experience to hold the line against extremist, polarizing individuals and ideologies. I will keep working to build our community, not destroy it.

**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.**

- a. **Decrease class size** to offer stronger learning relationships among teachers and students, to result in deeper access to learning and achieving success.
- b. **Recruiting and retaining educators and staff.** Public education is in a crisis of losing teachers from this profession. This problem stems from public opinion and treatment of educators; inadequate teacher preparation programs in colleges that meet the needs of today's learners; and finally, working conditions in public schools that include limited pay due to tax revenue base limitations, the pressure to meet state standards, and magnified public opinion reflecting a lack of trust for educators.
- c. **Revamp the standardized testing framework and schedule** that limits teachers' and students' capabilities to achieve meaningful success in learning.
- d. **Increase the rigor** of academic instruction for all students, including those with identified special needs. This work includes establishing a uniform grading policy.
- e. **Access more revenue streams** to ease the pressure on local residents (particularly home owners), who bear the brunt (over 50%) of paying for our public schools; in comparison, this amount is far less in other parts of Virginia. State law and accessing levers for local revenue generation can be addressed.

**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?**

FCPS's School Board must focus on *setting* policy, while the Superintendent *implements* that policy in accordance with clear and public measures. Our Superintendent is already making the operational changes needed to update an aged HR software system; implementing the new work of collective bargaining that this Board approved; continuing to institute intensive strategies begun recently for retaining diverse instructors; and planning for placing more teachers in classrooms, in front of students.

**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?"**

Policy is what will determine that all students are seen, respected, and educated to their abilities - by name and by need. Policy codifies our values and priorities. Our policies must not shy away from defining and embodying "equity", "antiracism", and "teaching truth in education".

Additionally, what gets funded gets done.

My responses in my **introductory statement** speak further to how I have and will continue to achieve the work of ensuring that every student succeeds.

**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?**

I have persevered in this role since 2020. I have endured making decisions regarding a global public health pandemic; international cyberterrorism attacks; legal suits being heard in local courts and the U.S. Supreme Court. On this Board, I've sued the Governor for the constitutionally-provided right of a School Board for local control, such as our right to decide on requiring masks in our buildings. I voted to change the admissions policy to the most visible high school in the nation, drawing the ire and legal attacks of the Governor, Attorney General, and right-wing-funded opposition. I seek to remain in this role to continue my defense of public education in this hostile political environment, and to reaffirm the necessity and value of public education.

I have managed this professionally by being grounded in a framework of "trust civility and respect in public service" - a motto I learned while completing the year-long, UVA Sorensen Institute for Public Leadership in 2018. I have managed this personally by constantly keeping in mind how I'd want my children - now in 4th and 7th grade in FCPS - to hear me speaking. I have a supportive spouse and friends, and trust from constituents. I reflect on the Democratic values for which I was endorsed and elected for in 2019, when faced with questions that will decide the fate of my community. On paper this is categorized as a "part time" role; however, to do this job effectively, it is full time and as such, it has been for me since January 1, 2020.

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

What gets funded gets done. The Board must continue reviewing where funds are spent and the returns on that investment via student success. This includes not only funds provided to FCPS via government sources, but also community-provided resources - through fundraising, grants and partnerships, and in-kind contributions. It is important to know the true cost for an excellent public education in Fairfax, and then budget accordingly for every student, in every school. Then access to opportunities and resources can be equitably sized.

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

I'd like to learn more robust School Board governance strategies to hone the Board's focus on policy work. I'd like to take advantage of training opportunities provided by the Virginia School Boards Association (VSBA); and also build allies across Virginia School Boards to address identified needs of our students in Fairfax, and throughout the Commonwealth.

**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?**

As the School Board Member now representing Hunter Mill, this is a sample of how I have engaged with constituents, students, and staff since 2020:

- **Attending events hosted at the over two dozen schools** where students whom I represent attend, including: family-engagement events in learning, such as those promoting reading, math, and science; multicultural and international events; student performances and exhibits in the arts; athletic events; back-to-school nights; in-school observation of classes on occasion (so as to limit interrupting instruction); volunteering in classrooms and in lunch rooms.
- **Maintaining excellent constituent services**, through quick turn-around on outreach received, by answering questions and engaging staff as needed to solve identified problems.
- **Initiating and accepting invitations to attend cross-agency meetings, and sustaining communications and work** with offices and individuals such as:
  - Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and the Hunter Mill District Supervisor
  - Fairfax County government offices that include: Office for Children, Public Library, Park Service, Police Department, Transportation, and Budget
  - Town of Vienna officials and appointed Committee Members, including the Sustainability Commission
  - Reston Association
  - Elected leaders in the General Assembly and U.S. Congress
  - Volunteer organizations, including PTA/PTO/PTSA/PTSO and their food pantries;
  - Interest groups, including Faith Alliance for Climate Action and several faith-based and cultural organizations;
  - Nonprofit community service providers, including Cornerstones and BRAWS
- **Regular e-newsletter** to 30,000 subscribers
- **Hosting Facebook and Twitter pages**
- **Having community meetings and town halls**
- **Attending PTA/PTO/PTSA/PTSO meetings** upon invitation, and offering to attend to share community updates and respond to questions from families and staff