



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 5pm on April 6, 2023.

Name: **Paul Thomas**

District or At-Large: Hunter Mill

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'm running for School Board because I care deeply about our community, our schools and our students, and believe that I am uniquely qualified to add value to FCPS. My deep roots in our community and schools, experience as a teacher, coach, parent, collaborator, and leader have prepared me to represent Hunter Mill on the School Board.

I attended Hunters Woods Elementary and Herndon Intermediate before going to South Lakes High School. My wife also attended Reston schools, so it's not surprising that when it was time to choose a place to raise our kids, we returned home. Our kids went to Sunrise Valley Elementary, Hughes Middle School, and South Lakes High School, and between us, we have spent 50 years as students in Hunter Mill District schools.

I received my BS in Mathematics and MS in Operations Research/Management Science from George Mason University. When I was in graduate school at George Mason, I worked as the JV field hockey coach at Madison High School and as a long-term substitute teacher at Madison and South Lakes. After graduating, I worked on decision support systems for a defense contractor for two years until I got the chance to take a big pay cut and teach in FCPS. I taught math and computer science at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology for six and a half years, during which time I also coached JV field hockey, JV girls' soccer, and varsity boys' tennis.

I left the classroom to write textbooks and develop curriculum, which I have been doing for most of the past 27 years. I've written a dozen textbooks and led the creation of numerous math and computer science courses for in-person, virtual and blended classrooms. I've worked extensively at the intersection of instruction, technology and solid research about what works.

Since returning to Reston 19 years ago, I have served on the boards of Reston Association and other local nonprofits. I currently serve on the Reston Community Center Board of Governors, the Fairfax County Human Services Council (for which I am this year's Budget Committee Chair), and the County's Successful Children and Youth Policy Team. I am currently in my second year as president of the South Lakes High School Band Boosters, and have served with the PTSA and All-Night Grad Party.

Much of the work of the School Board can be grouped into one of four buckets:

1. Hiring and managing the CEO and developing the budget
2. Ensuring that FCPS policies reflect the values of the people of Fairfax County
3. Adjudicating HR, discipline, and other appeals
4. Constituent services

Toward those ends, each School Board member must:

- Partner with parents and guardians and with groups representing the diverse elements of the Fairfax County community.
- Respect the value and importance of employees and employee organizations and involve them in decisions that affect them.
- Build coalitions to advocate for the Board's goals and policies.
- Communicate frequently and regularly with residents in the community, maintaining public trust through full and open communication.
- Focus on strategic leadership rather than administrative details.
- Protect the integrity and promote the positive image of the system and one another.
- Collaborate effectively with other Board members, as well as with FCPS and County staff and other County, State, and Federal elected officials.

(Each of the preceding items is adapted from the FCPS Board's *Strategic Governance Manual*.)

I've been a student, teacher and parent in FCPS, and I have spent many fulfilling years serving in our community. I'm also a strong team player who knows how to listen and collaborate. All of these experiences and qualities will help me provide tremendous value to the School Board, our schools and our community.

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. **Staffing:** Attracting, hiring, developing, supporting and retaining high-quality, diverse staff.
 - b. **Defending truth** in our curricula from those who would water it down or sanitize it.
 - c. **Equity and inclusion:** Ensuring that we meet the needs of our diverse student population and making sure that every student, staff member and family feels safe, supported and accepted.
 - d. **Effective collaboration with staff and unions:** Our schools will be stronger when our teachers have a stronger voice.
 - e. **Stewardship (planning for change and growth):** The county is growing and changing while our facilities are aging. FCPS needs to solve today's problems while planning for the changes that are coming.

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?

To get and retain great teachers, we need to ensure that FCPS is an attractive employer. Prospective teachers must look favorably at the pay, support and respect they can expect when working for FCPS.

We certainly have to give our full compensation packages a serious look every year, but that's not enough. We also need to do a great job of hiring, developing and supporting our teachers and other school-based staff.

When it comes to developing teachers, we don't need to start from scratch. For instance, Peer Assistance and Review programs can be very effective ways to help teachers who are new to the profession (including career switchers), as well as more experienced teachers who are looking to hone their craft.

When it comes to retaining our excellent staff, lack of respect from parents and the public and increased workload are major concerns. Teachers and school-based administrators need our support. Central Office leaders and the School Board must consider how every policy change and new program will increase the workload of teachers and other school-based staff.

The School Board also needs to not just dump problems on schools, but must work

with them to solve problems. Families and other stakeholders can help us identify and describe problems. They can also help evaluate solutions. School-based staff need to be partners in developing solutions that really work. If teachers and administrators don't feel like they have our respect and support, they will continue to leave FCPS for jobs that provide them with the respect and support they deserve.

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?"

First of all, we need to listen to students and families. Only by listening can we learn the needs, concerns and goals of every student and family. Organizations such as school PTAs, SEPTA, FCPS Pride and others can be great partners because of their abilities to convene members of our community. County efforts such as Opportunity Neighborhoods can help as well.

Be open and responsive. Not every request or inquiry from a constituent has an answer that is quick and easy, but everyone should expect a timely, thoughtful response. Being on the School Board will be my full-time job, so I will give full effort to being responsive and helpful.

As we listen, we need to recognize that not all families with the greatest needs have strong voices. That means that we need to reach out to many families and students who lack a strong voice. As we listen and start creating solutions, we also need to engage school-based staff who can help frame effective, informed, scalable solutions. The best solutions don't trickle down from the top. They must grow from the students, families and teachers.

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?

First of all, I have rather thick skin, and I'm ready for the metaphorical stones that people will inevitably throw. I also think it will help that my youngest child will graduate from FCPS in spring 2023. I won't take things personally or worry about how anything will spill over to my children.

While serving on the boards of Reston Association and the Reston Community Center, I have found that the best thing to do when someone is providing input is to listen or read attentively, take notes and then thank them for their input. If a response is required, then keep it short and fact-based and commit to follow up when appropriate.

People need to be heard, and even the worst vitriol can have salient points. On the other hand, engaging in debate from the dais is rarely productive.

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

First of all, FCPS needs to truly use equity as a lens through which all decisions are made.

- **Equity does not mean equality:** Equity doesn't mean eliminating rigor or making every school, program or teacher the same. Those who oppose equity efforts often frame them as a choice between high academic standards and equity. This choice is a false dichotomy. We can and must create excellent outcomes for all of our students.
- **Staffing:** Schools need staffing that supports the diverse needs of their students. Those staff also need time, professional development and support that help them engage effectively with their specific student populations.
- **Dig into the details:** In a division as large as FCPS, it is often convenient to focus on averages, but equity requires disaggregation. We need to identify the needs of our sub-populations, and apply sound research as well as insights from families, students and staff to address those needs.

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

I want to learn more about:

- How FCPS connects with Opportunity Neighborhoods and other county programs that provide wraparound services.
- The numerous languages and cultures that enrich our communities.
- How can FCPS support and connect with workforce development efforts like the WISH center at Hybla Valley?
- How will the School Board collaborate with unions as collective bargaining becomes a reality?
- FCPS's technology infrastructure. I have spent three decades working at the intersection of education, technology and research about what does and doesn't work.
- Details of the budgeting process. I have dealt with the county's budgeting process as chair of the Human Services Council's Budget Committee and as the Reston Community Center's Finance Committee Chair, but look forward to delving into the details of FCPS's process to develop and monitor its budget.

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?

Each group requires a set of strategies. Listening sessions, online surveys, email, social media and PTA meetings are decent starting points, but they are not sufficient.

Students: Visiting classrooms of various types as well as a broad range of extra- and co-curricular activities are critical ways to learn from students.

Teachers: Some input can be gleaned from the activities mentioned for students (e.g., talking with a teacher before a concert or game), but I would want to hold listening sessions at department and staff meetings as well. And with collective bargaining, unions will have stronger voices that can help tremendously.

Families are the toughest group. PTAs and parent coffees are good, but they are far from representative of the diversity in our communities. In addition to PTAs and other opportunities for families to come to us, I would find ways to go to communities that generally have less of a voice. For instance, I would work alongside our County Supervisor to connect to Opportunity Neighborhoods.