

People's Alliance PAC 2008 Questionnaire for Durham School Board Candidates

PLEASE NOTE: After candidate interviews have taken place, these responses will be placed on the People's Alliance website.

Candidate's Name: Leigh Bordley—Candidate for the at large seat

1. What strengths and/or skills do you have that would make you a good Durham Public Schools (DPS) School Board member?

I have developed a variety of skills and strengths that would make me a good school board member. They include:

- I have worked for ten years with low-income African-American students -- precisely the group we must reach to resolve the achievement gap and drop-out crisis we face. I have coordinated the efforts of more than 100 volunteers each year – community members, teachers, Duke students, and business owners and employers. I have a network of contacts within similar organizations, the area colleges, and funders. I have researched effective practices and am grounded in the reality of what works with this group of students.
- At the same time, my own children have given me a window into what we can do to better challenge and support students at all levels of achievement. As a parent of three children who have attended four system schools so far, I have directly experienced many of the diverse options within the Durham Public Schools: elementary, middle and high schools; magnet and neighborhood schools; and transportation by bus, carpool and walking.
- I have an active interest in – and considerable experience -- working with diverse groups of people. I attended North Carolina Public Schools (graduated from Chapel Hill High School, 1979 and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1983). I chose to live in Durham when I returned to the area in 1991, after being away for graduate school and other jobs, because I wanted to live in a diverse, urban city. I have relished the opportunity to live and work with an amazing cross-section of people. I have an ability to communicate and share ideas with people who are different from me and find common ground. I can see challenges from a variety of perspectives and am comfortable working with groups of people to brainstorm solutions. I strongly believe in the power of collective thought and action.

- I am a creative thinker. As far as I know, there is no other mentoring program in the country that provides each participant with four different mentors, as does Partners for Youth. I created this model after researching effective practices, and communicating with a range of people in Durham about what was being done and what needed to be done. In 2000, Partners for Youth won the Council for Advancement and Support of Education Gold Medal for innovative program design. Partners for Youth has been successful because my staff and I think creatively about solutions and can inspire and organize people to work towards common goals.
- I have a Masters of Social Work with a concentration in Community Organizing (University of Maryland, 1983). My education and applied experience with Partners for Youth have given me an appreciation for and experience with program evaluation. Although it is difficult to assess the impact of some interventions, it is essential that we do so. I think this background would be useful as the board strives to assess the impact of various initiatives. We are fortunate to be located in an area with plenty of expertise in this area, and we must avail ourselves of it. We must make sure that we are using the most effective models available, tailoring them as needed for our community and schools, and making sure they are improving our children's education.

2. Please discuss your community activities in Durham.

Since my family moved to Durham in 1991, I have participated in a number of community activities. Most of my volunteer work has been with the schools.

- As we began to implement the magnet plan, I was part of an effort coordinated by the Greater Durham Chamber of Commerce to educate parents about the magnet system.
- I have been a member of PTA and the Site-based Committee at George Watts Elementary School (I co-wrote the grant and assisted the grassroots fundraising effort that secured new playground equipment in 1990's, was alternate for principal selection committee and chaired "Celebrate Your Child" in 1996); E.K. Powe Elementary School PTA and Site-based Committee (also chaired Wrapping Paper fundraiser in 2001); at Durham School of the Arts I was membership coordinator of the PTA for two years. I am currently the president of the Durham School of the Arts Foundation.
- I was a member of the People's Alliance Education Committee for several years. I helped interview school board candidates and met with then- Senator Wib Gulley concerning the initiation of charter schools.

While a member of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, I coordinated our work with the Interfaith Hospitality Network for several years in the 1990's.

For the past six years, I have been an instructor in the Children's Atrium at St. Philip's Episcopal Church.

3. What are some ways that Durham Public Schools can reduce the achievement gap?

While the achievement gap has narrowed in the past few years, it remains problematic by any measure. In 2006-7 80% of white students passed their EOC's, but only 40% of African American students did. Our system as a whole is 54% African-American, 23% white, and 17% Latino, but our AIG population is 59% white, 30% African American and 4% Latino. Even though we've made progress increasing the number of non-white students taking AP classes, only 35% of our African-American students passed the exam, compared to approximately 64% of all students.

I believe there are a number of things we can do to continue closing the gap.

- We must find ways to provide our struggling students and schools with excellent teachers. I think teachers who teach at Title One schools, for example, should receive additional pay for working with students who have higher than average needs. I would support exploring the possibility of creating a Teach for America type model where experienced, skilled teachers would agree to go to high-need schools for a period of time in exchange for a pay bonus.
- We must encourage all students to take rigorous coursework and make sure they are receiving the support they need to do well in it. Students who have IEPs or need to be evaluated must receive the on-going evaluation and the high quality services they need to succeed. Students must have access to trained tutors who work with them consistently, understand their learning style and communicate with their teachers.
- More of Durham's children whose parents cannot provide adequate preparation for school need to attend high quality pre-kindergarten programs. A disproportionate number of non-white children begin school lagging in terms of language acquisition and reading readiness. Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact that high quality early childhood development programs have on children's learning; these benefits last a lifetime. Children who attend high quality programs are less likely to repeat a grade, drop-out of school, depend on welfare, or become pregnant as teenagers. According to a study published by the Economic Policy Institute, communities also experience rate of return of more than 3:1 for funds invested in early childhood education.

4. Describe the current situation in terms of the drop-out rate and suspension rate in Durham Public Schools. What do you know about current programs that are in place to address these issues? What more can be done?

Our drop-out rate is decreasing and is now below the state average. We have a comprehensive High School Completion Plan which lays out the barriers that prevent students from graduating and strategies for overcoming them. We still have a tremendous problem. Our drop-out rate is 30%; only 70% of our ninth graders are still in school by the time they should graduate. More than 50% of our African-American male students drop-out. This is one of the primary issues that drew me into the campaign and is one I have spent the last ten years working on through Partners for Youth.

Current programs that address the drop-out rate which I support:

- Smaller, alternative high schools – The Performance Learning Center, The Clement Early College High School, and the Middle College High School at Durham Technical Community College are great innovations. I enthusiastically support our creation of Holton School to provide vocational education. We desperately need this alternative for students not interested in or suited to college. We must make sure Holton provides the most advanced instruction possible that will prepare students for well-paying careers. I'd like us to strengthen and raise the profile of our specialized and vocational pathways at our major high schools (e.g., Automotive Engineering at Southern) and make sure we communicate that these are legitimate, rigorous tracks that students are encouraged to proactively choose.
- I strongly support extended day programs such as the Twilight School, which is providing a second chance for high school students who need to re-take a class they have failed.
- I support on-going efforts to involve the broader community in supporting our schools such as the At-Risk Youth Collaborative which has brought five groups that work with at-risk students together to provide comprehensive support services. Obviously, I think other programs that work to support our students such as Partners for Youth, the Achievement Academy, and Student U are important. The impact of these programs should be thoroughly evaluated, and we should replicate effective practices.

In terms of suspensions, I am very pleased that our suspension rate has been reduced by 50% in the past four years. It is currently 18%, but this is still too high. I know that administrators have been thoughtfully managing class changes, implementing the Positive Behavior Support System, and training teachers through initiatives like Capturing Kids Hearts as ways to reduce discipline problems and engage students. The current board has done a tremendous job of insisting that suspensions be reduced and this has made a significant impact. We must maintain our focus on this issue and continue to support effective practices.

I support programs like the one which will be piloted next year at Githens. Through this plan, support teams of teachers, social workers, and appropriate staff will meet with

students who have had problems with attendance and behavior in the past before the school year starts to make a plan for avoiding those problems in the coming year. The plans will outline clear expectations for students and parents, identify a support systems at the school, and establish a proactive plan for success.

Similarly, I support the Truancy Triage Center where truant students are assessed in a variety of areas including their academic ability, mental health status and social service needs. The Center is providing comprehensive support to students with truancy problems and getting them back in the classroom.

In addition to these efforts, I would also propose:

- Establishing an extended day middle school. I believe very strongly that our children need to feel a part of their school community by being part of an entity within the school where they are known and can make a contribution. I would like to identify a middle school where we could pilot a school model that would keep students until 5/6 pm and involve them in a variety of enrichment activities after school, from sports to the arts.

My own children participate in after-school activities, and I know it increases their allegiance to their schools and is something that makes them excited to go to school. Too many children don't have that experience. My son went out for basketball at Durham School of the Arts last year. He made it, but 30 other kids who wanted to be a part of school activity were cut. My husband went to a private school growing up. After-school enrichment activities of all types - athletics, the arts, and interest-based clubs - were standard for all students. Teenagers have a driving need to be a part of a social group. We need to provide them with more positive options through their schools. I want to see what we can do in collaboration with community partners to make this happen, evaluate its impact and consider expanding it if it is successful.

- In my work through Partners for Youth I have seen a tremendous need for mental health services for our teens who are struggling with depression, anxiety and other mental health issues. I would like to explore the possibility of placing therapists in the schools, maybe on a rotating basis, which would eliminate the logistical barriers to students receiving counseling and hopefully reduce the stigma that too many people still associate with mental health.
- We must be a part of a community-wide effort to address the social issues that plague our community and pervasive disrespect for education promoted by our broader popular culture. Currently 20% of our children live in poverty; almost 50% of our elementary age students receive free/reduced lunch. Children of all races and income levels watch too much TV, read too little, and many of them lack the social skills that are essential for successful adults. The schools cannot solve this tremendous problem alone, but by working together, our community can send our children a more consistent message that we are depending on all of

them to succeed academically, and that we will support them in reaching this goal.

- I support lobbying the General Assembly to require compulsory school attendance to age eighteen. I recently had a student tell me that he planned to drop out when he was sixteen because it would be legal, and he didn't want poor grades to interfere with his getting his drivers license.
- We must continue to search for ways to make in-school-suspension an effective method for enforcing discipline expectations and making sure that the intervention addresses the core issues motivating their behavior. Students who are long-term suspended must receive support services and excellent instruction. We must have highly skilled teachers and professionals working with these students. I think we can do more to support Lakeview and ensure that those students continue to learn and are also prepared for high school graduation and beyond. This is a complicated area that defies easy answers; I look forward to learning more about it and devising solutions.

5. What are some of the programs that are working well in the Durham Public Schools?

In addition to the programs I've already mentioned, Dr. Harris' emphasis on Advanced Academics is working well and has increased:

- The number of students receiving AIG services. We now have 3,200 students in AIG, and I'm very happy that we have another 3,200 students in the AIG Nurturing Program
- The number of students taking honors classes. We've had a 56% increase in this area in the two years since we started block scheduling
- The number of students enrolled in Advanced Placement level classes. We've seen an 11% increase in 2 years and a 22% increase in the number of tests taken.
- The AVID program is teaching our students specific study strategies, preparing them for standardized tests, and encouraging them to attend college. We now have AVID programs in nineteen schools from elementary to high school.
- We have dramatically improved our communication with parents. The Phone Master system is used regularly, most if not all our schools have outdoor signs that announce up-coming activities and news, and email has become much more reliable, and many teachers use it to up-date parents. The board has created additional ways for parents to be involved through Kitchen Table Conversations and the Be Our Guest initiatives.

- We have made great strides in providing our schools with technology – laptops for all teachers at gateway grades, many more laptops available for all teachers, up-grading our student information software through NC Wise (which will allow us to track students when they move to or come from others systems and will also allow us to better assess our drop-out rate), and installing instructional technology like Smart Boards.

6. What process, if any, should be in place in Durham Public Schools to evaluate the performance and effectiveness of the middle management level within the system?

Having an effective middle management is essential. Even the most wonderful program model will not be effective if it is not implemented thoroughly and well. Given the high stakes testing pressure on our students, teachers and principals, it only makes sense that middle management is evaluated and held accountable as well.

I would support instituting an evaluation system that is informed by feedback gathered from top level administrators as well as teachers, so that we have a 360 degree view of their performance.

7. What principles should be used for determining student assignment? What should be done about over-crowding in some schools?

The following principles should be used for determining student assignment

- Parental Choice – We have an array of options available for families to choose from. I want all of our students to be in a school that meets their interests and learning style. I want all of our schools to become schools that families assessing the options would potentially choose.
- Diversity – I believe all students benefit from attending school with a diverse student body. This is why my own three children attend Durham Public Schools. I think we have to actively work to ensure that a sub-set of our schools don't remain racially isolated by making them schools that families of any race would choose.
- Neighborhood Schools – are the backbone of our system. The vast majority of our students attend neighborhood schools. We must make sure that resources – human and material – are distributed equitably among our magnet and neighborhood schools. I will work hard to ensure that our neighborhood schools get what they need, and that families attending those schools can feel confident about this option within our choice system.

Regarding overcrowding, I was gratified to hear that Durham Public Schools, the city and county, are entering into a contract with a professional firm that studies demographic

trends. Hopefully, this information will help us do a better job of projecting growth and development trends.

We have to do everything we can to accurately plan for school construction and the funds we need to support it. Specifically, we should:

- Begin a system of land-banking. Large tracts of land are increasingly difficult to acquire due to availability and expense. Land in southern Durham is currently costing \$100,000 per acre. We can expect this price to increase still further in the future.
- We need to work closely with the County Commissioners and keep the community informed and involved in our plans to ensure the passage of the bonds new building requires.
- We need to recognize the incredible benefit that our new small schools that are being housed by community partners such as Northgate Mall, North Carolina Central University and Durham Technical College provide for our system. We will soon have 2,000 students in these schools. This represents a substantial contribution to our system capacity.

Despite these efforts, it is inevitable that, in an area experiencing exponential growth, there will continue to be schools that are over-crowded from time to time. We need to make sure that these schools receive the extra resources they need to serve additional students in terms of janitorial support, supplies and staffing (teachers' aides). There may be new resources we should allocate, such as an additional type of aide who would be responsible for simply managing transitions between rooms and buildings, and other movements that are necessary when a school is over-crowded.

8. What are the educational needs of the Latino students in Durham and what steps are being taken to meet these needs? What additional steps, if any, should be taken?

The proportion of our student population that is Latino is growing rapidly. Currently, 4,000 students, or 17% of our population is Latino. More importantly, 70% of these students are in elementary school. Fifty percent of the live births in Durham County are Latino children. The vast majority of Latino children do not attend any kind of program before they enter kindergarten, which would prepare them for the structure of a school or begin their bilingual education. Latino students are at risk for dropping out and under-achievement. Only 4% of our AIG students are Latino, and a huge number of Latino students drop –out of our system.

I strongly support the following initiatives that are underway:

- ESL instruction, including ESL inclusion classes and sheltered content classes at the high school level that help ESL students transition to mainstream classes.
- The ESL Registration Center at El Centro that provides Spanish-speaking parents with information and assistance that allows them to effectively support and advocate for their children.
- Spanish language instruction for staff, including innovative collaborative efforts like the Spanish Leap program sponsored by Duke and Duke-Durham United Way, which has taken teachers and administrators to Guatemala for Spanish immersion classes for the past three years.

I think there are some additional steps we can take to better support our Latino students. We should:

- Recruit and retain a larger numbers of trained, fluent ESL teachers.
- Provide more funding for document translation services, which are relatively inexpensive and would free up our limited number of translators for face-to-face translations at meetings and conferences.
- Expand student language clubs like one at Hillside led by students, that benefits English speakers taking Spanish and gives Spanish-speaking students the experience of being the experts.
- Provide undocumented students who have lived in the North Carolina for a certain amount of time (four years?) with in-state tuition at our public universities and access to college loans. I believe this would be a wise investment in the future of our state from a fiscal and social perspective.

9. What are your plans for rewarding and retaining good teachers?

Nothing is more important than hiring and retaining excellent teachers. Currently we replace 17% of our staff each year. We have a chronic problem finding enough teachers in the areas of science, math and instruction for exceptional children. Teacher turn-over creates a tremendous disruption in our schools and makes it difficult to build a school community that has a common vision and works together collaboratively. Constantly recruiting and retraining teachers is an exorbitant expense for our system.

There are several issues that I think are critical to our attempts to hire and retain the excellent teachers we need.

- We must offer competitive pay for all of our teachers. The local supplement we offer new teachers is competitive within our area, but we must increase the local supplement for our experienced teachers. A few years ago, Duke and Self-Help

Credit Union offered teachers low-interest housing loans within certain areas. We should expand our partnerships with area businesses that could enable us to offer perks such as low-interest car loans or other in-kind gifts or benefits.

- We must treat teachers as the professionals they are and provide them meaningful, practical professional development options that utilize the latest technology. I support recruiting our community partners for assist with this task, in the way that Duke has worked with us to train AIG teachers.
- We must provide teachers with adequate planning time and support. Our Professional Learning Communities are a good initiative designed to address this challenge. Nationally and within Durham Public Schools, teachers say lack of planning time is their biggest challenge. We can free teachers up to do this planning partly by adequately staffing our schools and making sure all of our schools have effective discipline plans that are enforced fairly and effectively. We must continue to provide our new teachers with mentors.
- We must explore new ways of developing and retaining talented principals. We could consider the possibility of offering our best principals positions as “Executive Principals” which would provide them with a salary on par with other assistant superintendents while keeping them in place as principals. This enhanced status would provide all potential principals and principals a new opportunity for advancement while keeping them in the schools where we need them.
- I would like to explore the possibility of providing teachers and principals we want to retain with sabbaticals, during which they could do research, receive training and re-charge.

Thank you very much for this opportunity to comment on these important issues. LB