

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: Nancy Cox—Candidate for 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'll answer this with a couple of different approaches. First, in reviewing the Duties and Responsibilities of Board Members per DPS, I find that I have been directly involved in the work of our Board in several ways.

The Board works with the Administration to develop the budget. While at the Durham Public Education Network, I served on the Superintendent's Budget Advisory Board which required members to attend 4 in depth meetings with the goal of developing the budget that goes to the County Commissioners. It was helpful to advocate for the budget to the Commissioners having been a part of its development. I was also able to effectively share key points of the budget, with the PTAs at my daughter's schools as the legislative liaison, a position I have held several times.

The Network successfully created a Budget Analysis released to the public that explained funding sources, fixed expenditures, allocations based on numbers etc. This proved to be a useful document in working with various constituencies to better understand the DPS budget.

Board members are charged with creating attendance lines. As Hope Valley Elementary neared completion, district lines had to be developed. I was intricately involved in developing potential attendance zones, attending meetings, meeting with Board members to share a plan, and was deemed a leader in the effort to keep neighborhoods intact while working to create a diverse student population at the new school.

Regarding the role of the Board in insuring student safety, I was appointed by the Durham Council of PTAs, per the Superintendent's request, to sit on the Emergency Management Team. The Team included representatives from city and county government, all law enforcement and emergency agencies, as well as other groups whose services would be instrumental in response to a significant emergency crisis at anyone of our schools. The work of this committee was serious and confidential and it was a great honor for me to represent the prospective needs of parents in the event of an emergency.

Finally, a large role of Board members is captured in policy 1100.8 where Board members are instructed to interpret or share the work of the school system with the public. Just one solid example, at DPEN, my main project was to work to inform the public on the necessity of recruiting and retaining qualified teachers, a bedrock of insuring a quality school system, and to partner with various community groups to support DPS in meeting this goal. Presentations to business leaders, the teachers association, and others allowed me to rally support for teacher mentoring program. Our

annual education summit focused on this issue and through my efforts we secured two nationally recognized experts to present on the issue.

As you can see, I have extensive experience in carrying out duties very similar to those charged on our Board of Education. The other skills and talents I bring come from my work as an educator and community supporter of Education.

I know my 22 years of building my knowledge in the field of Education will show through and it is hard to deny the benefit my recent teaching experience with DPS will have on the work of the Board. I also had the good fortune to intern for 8 weeks with the Social Studies Coordinator at Central office in 2004.

I am confident that you will come to see me as a candidate with broad knowledge regarding the resources of our community garnered through participation in things like, Leadership Durham through the Chamber of Commerce, and Neighborhood College, a joint city/county initiative to educate active citizens on the program of city and county government. As I answer the following questions, you will come to know me as a person whose commitment to education is born out in my employment, volunteerism and community activism and that my combined experience make me a strong candidate for the School Board.

2. Please discuss your community activities in Durham.

My nickname is Nancy Networker, having worked at the Durham Public Education Network. I think that this nickname fits, as my greatest pleasure in serving my community is to connect people to resources, like minded organizations to one and other, and to share empowering information, all with the goals of streamlining delivery of services and enhancing effectiveness of programs to benefit, in most cases, Durham's children. To that end I chose to represent my school-based PTAs on the Durham Council of PTAs, the umbrella organizations for the PTA, and was elected to the role of Vice President of Programming. I have served in this position for the last 3 years. An example of how I use the focus of the Council to meet my personal goals, as noted above, is our recent panel presentation, "Durham – Supporting our Students." I was able to create a panel that included a representative from: government, social services, DPS, a community-based nonprofit, Higher Education and Business. Our goals were met, PTAs were connected with resources, panel members saw immediate opportunities for collaboration and the quality of the information shared opened up many possibilities for mutual support of each stakeholder's initiatives all to support children.

From its inception in 2004, I have been a member of the joint city/county initiative called Results Based Accountability. I serve with approximately 25 other organizations, including DPS, on the committee, "Children Ready for and Succeeding in Schools," and the subcommittee on, "After-school and Out of School Time." Our subcommittee recently secured a grant to provide training to child care providers in a myriad of settings in key areas such as effective communication with parents.

I am a member of the Durham Preservation society and have a particular interest in insuring our children grow up appreciating Durham History. I have been a Board member with the Junior League of Durham and Orange Counties serving as the liaison to Orange County's Communities In Schools program. Our daughter's are active in Girl Scouts, for which I have been an area organizer and leader, and we were initiates of the Durham Children's Choir to which I lend my extensive community connections.

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

The achievement gap is greatest the first day of school as children bring with them resources that either do or don't match what they will be expected to do in school. Therefore, I am a proponent of viewing education as a birth to 18 endeavor. Quality, early childcare that has school readiness as a goal is crucial. DPS currently collaborates with Durham's Partnership for Children and other early childcare organizations. In fact, the head of the Partnership and a senior DPS official co-chair the RBA committee mentioned above. By providing school sites and personnel for the state funded, "More at 4," program, we are reaching as far down as currently possible. Our strong kindergarten transition program is another way we recognize the importance of working with children early on. A new program, Durham Connects, that enjoys collaboration from various Durham organizations, will provide a home visit by a nurse for every child born in Durham with the goal of connecting parents to needed resources including resources that focus on developing social skills and academic skills.

Another proactive method for reaching children at the earliest stage of social and academic development is to implement universal screening, particularly for the social skills necessary to be an effective member of a learning community. Fortunately, DPS is moving in this direction. I have done significant reading and have had conversations with key personnel and other experts in the area of early childhood development and the prospects that screening yields for diagnostic data with immediate implementation strategies is exciting. (www.predictiveassessment.com and SSBD or SRSS assessments).

Finally, for elementary parents especially, DPS is offering Parenting Workshops. I was facilitator at the last Power of Parents workshop and am impressed by the desire of parents to learn new strategies to support their children's academic and social development. PTA Council offered a similar program before the system had a Family Involvement Coordinator in place and it too was well received. We have several resources in the community to support parent education. Communities In Schools is working with staff at one elementary school to provide training in a highly regarded program called the Incredible Years. Additional collaborations like this must be identified to honor parents desire carry out their role in supporting their children's academic success.

Beyond the promising practice of early intervention, we must recognize that schools can really only effect change within their four walls, so to speak. Therefore we must do everything possible to insure that we create a culture where teachers and principals are willing to accept that every child can be successful –no caveats! When driven from this belief, schools recognize that they must assess the structures and systems in place to insure that no child's academic needs go unmet. An example of DPS' commitment is the implementation of the Positive Behavior Support Model. Through my work with the PTA Council, we are exploring ways that parents can become an integral part of these teams.

As a Board member, I will use my prior knowledge in this area having worked at the Center for Early Adolescence, specifically on identifying structures and systems for district-wide Middle Grades Reform, to support our staff in taking necessary steps to create school culture and climate that promote high academic success.

The implementation of Professional Learning Communities supports teachers who are committed to acting from a no excuses platform and who expect academic success for all students. PLC allows teachers to work collaboratively to do things like examine data to drive the choice of teaching strategies, class configuration, and assessment possibilities. I have enjoyed the professional stimulation that this opportunity for collegiality provides while a teacher in Chapel Hill-Carrboro city schools and I will be a strong advocate for protecting this opportunity for my colleagues in Durham.

A recent article published in Teaching Magazine through Education Week, features Rogers Herr Middle School, where I taught last year, a school that has accepted the responsibility for insuring that all children succeed regardless of socio-economic status, family dynamics, proficiency in English etc. Rogers Herr will be successful at narrowing the achievement gap by examining what it is they need to do as teachers in the classroom and as a faculty in structuring the school for high academic and behavior expectations. However, it is a formidable task. Case studies, (Effort, Excellence in Urban Classrooms, Corbett et al.) show that the time and energy commitment by teachers too often creates an imbalance between their work and personal lives. This is why it is imperative that DPS and community groups including, the faith community, government, non-profit and business, come together to support the work of our teachers. For example, children with weak math skills need time after school for guided practice but it is not realistic or fair to expect teachers to give their time freely. Fortunately we have strong after school programs but the student to staff ratio is too high for the kind of one on one assistance that these students need. Volunteers, preferably those with strong math skills or who use math in their vocation, are needed to work with students. DPS does have a volunteer coordinator and each school has a coordinator – we need to strengthen their effectiveness at securing qualified volunteers. We may want to look at training high school students as tutors and securing funding to pay them as younger students often respond favorably to peer assistance. Another idea is to look at flexible hours for teachers where a teacher comes in later in the day and works until 6pm.

There are many strategies that DPS already has in place and opportunities abound at strengthening current efforts especially by tapping into outside resources to support the work of our teachers. I know that my extensive reach into the community, and my own experience as a teacher, will allow me to be a strong advocate for creating collaborations that will allow us to close the gap – Durham has everything we could possibly need to make this happen.

4. Describe the current situation in terms of the dropout 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?

Although the number of dropouts has declined steadily in Durham, 508 young people, disproportionately minority, are entering into an adult world ill equipped to enjoy a quality life. I believe the decrease can be attributed to a number of successful approaches but an obvious success is the creation of small, non-traditional high schools. As a teacher of 8th graders, I was involved in helping families make decisions about 9th grade. Working with our Career Counselor, I educated myself on the myriad of options available to our students by attending presentations, and making site visits in order to share

information with families so that children could plug into a program that would motivate them toward high school completion. As examples, one student went into Southern's City of Medicine Academy, another into Hillside's New Tech Highschool, several into the International Bach laureate program at Hillside. When children see relevance in their curriculum in terms of future career opportunities, they are motivated to stay in school.

A second successful program is the Freshman Academy pioneered at Jordan and in place at several of our high schools. Research has proven that transition from middle school is where we lose kids who feel insignificant and overlooked in a large school and ill equipped to handle the rigors of the high school curriculum without the support that they enjoyed in the middle school. (Mizelle, Nancy. Middle School Journal, Vol. 31, No.5, May 2000).

In terms of what more can be done to eliminate Dropping Out, I believe our next best solution lies in the formation of Durham's most recent small high school, the Professional Learning Center, which is product of the nationally recognized, non-profit, Communities In Schools. (Milliken, Bill. The Last Drop Out. 2007.) Durham is incredibly fortunate to have a strong CIS program led by a Board and Executive with a long history in this Federally and community supported initiative. I worked with CIS in Orange County in the early 90's and am overjoyed at the success it has experienced with support from every President since Jimmy Carter. Housed in the offices of Northgate Mall, CIS is working diligently to create wrap around services from all segments of the community to support the teaching staff at PLC. For example, the students will receive training from the non-profit, Sales and Service Training Center, which will enhance their employability for jobs that are waiting for them at the mall per the support of the owners of Northgate. These kinds of collaborations and partnerships, connecting resources to people, streamlining services, and partnering to strengthen programs, is what we need to keep students plugged in and excited about their education as they experience relevance and develop the connection between current actions and long term payoff.

Although some of these same programs and approaches will make a difference in terms of reducing suspension, strategies that effect what happens in the classroom must also be addressed. A current success is the, "Capturing Kids Hearts," program in place at all of our Middle schools. This concept of building relationships with children where they feel welcomed into school and the classroom, well known by their teachers as individuals, and recognized for their contributions to the success of the school, are very familiar to me. My co-authored book, Advisory Programs in the Middle Grades, a NMSA publication, remains a top seller in assisting schools with developing healthy school and classroom climates.

The early screening assessment mentioned above will help us identify children who need assistance in developing social skills necessary to work as a contributing member of a learning environment. Children who start out or learn early on how to get along with their peers, transition from activities, respect the need for basic classroom rules etc. will not end up ever facing the prospect of suspension.

Insuring that the school has put into place systems and structures that create high expectations for behavior are also necessary. To this end, DPS senior staff have created Support Teams that are currently conducting personalized visits to each of our schools and using diagnostic measures to assess effectiveness of programs including those meant to encourage appropriate school behavior such as In School Suspension.

Used correctly, ISS is our best compromise at insuring a classroom environment conducive to learning and meeting the academic needs of all students. ISS should be a temporary measure for students who have made poor behavior choices where they can receive assistance on their school work from a qualified teacher, and be coached to make and practice better behavior skills such as self-monitoring, before returning to the classroom. (See the collective works of William Glasser on whose research many Behavior Modification approaches are based. I had the good fortune to be trained in Glasser's Reality Therapy and Control Theory while a teacher in Albemarle County schools, Charlottesville, VA).

Innovative, evaluated programs, teachers committed to doing whatever it takes, and a supportive community exercising their expertise, are the keys to eliminating dropping out and tuning out, and reducing suspension. Obviously many of these same approaches and those discussed under strategies and mindsets to close the achievement gap, go hand in hand.

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

I believe in my previous answers I have mentioned several successful programs. Having been a teacher and having worked in Central office, I am continually amazed by the level of dedication and expertise of DPS personnel so we should not be surprised to learn that Durham Public Schools is deemed as a model in many areas.

I would like to share information about the AVID program, as I was the Coordinator and Elective teacher last year at Rogers Herr. Advancement via Individualized Determination is a national program geared toward children who are achieving but with additional assistance can be assured of placement in the college preparatory pathway in high school. AVID is in place in most of our high schools and middle schools and in several elementaries. AVID is strongly supported by our Administration. The program at Lowes Grove Middle School is the most developed and is seeking national recognition as a Demonstration school. Let me share just a few of the key features of AVID and examples of how I implemented them at Rogers Herr.

Students need to have a future oriented perspective. We accomplish this by helping students see the connection between present effort and long term payoff by introducing them to different college majors and potential careers through: campus visits, college guest speakers, adult guest speakers who share their high school and college experiences and how they translated into a career path, and web-based college explorations.

Another key feature is tutoring, usually in Math, as the kids are encouraged to take Algebra in 8th grade. Through my connections, I secured a young professional to come each week and work with small groups; it was wonderful that his love for math and computers translated into a career in those fields making him an inspiration for the students. I also taught students how to work effectively in study groups that we know is an experience shared particularly by successful Asian students.

Finally, working with parents to assist them in supporting the goals of AVID is important. Tapping into my knowledge of summer learning opportunities and inviting guest speakers from organization like the Arts Council, I helped parents identify camps, classes, and internships. Along these lines, I worked with parents to identify mentors for

their children. I think any parent will agree that having another caring adult in your child's life is a good thing. As family networks deteriorate, it has become necessary for unrelated adults to accept the joy and responsibility of supporting our children. Durham is fortunate to have several organizations that work to provide mentors including, Durham Companions, Durham's Partners for Youth and the Mentoring Alliance at the Volunteer Center.

I could name so many other successful programs and I will use this opportunity to suggest that my long-term, in depth involvement with DPS as an employee and community supporter will most definitely enhance my effectiveness as your School Board representative. I believe that I will have a real jump-start and won't be too far behind my fellow board members currently serving.

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?

A call to the Executive Director of Recruitment and Retention enlightened me on this subject. Currently, principals evaluate members of their administrative staff. Central office Staff develop professional goals that are approved by their supervisor, and reviewed periodically throughout the year by the supervisor. They use instruments familiar in other professions. Principals are reviewed by Senior staff, changes in the instruments used are being dictated by the state. The customer service and teacher surveys are used as a feedback tool for principal effectiveness. I believe we have in place adequate measures and I look forward to seeing the new tools being developed by the NC Standards for Teaching. I know that as a teacher last year, I was subject to evaluation and found the process was handled professionally and was used for instructive purposes as well.

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

I support the goals of the redistricting done last year where we sought to remedy situations where we had either pockets, islands or peninsulas in terms of the way district lines look on a map. The goal was to create stronger, more direct feeder patterns between traditional elementary, middle and high schools. To some degree, this does create a feeling of neighborhood schools where identifiable neighborhoods were kept intact. I do believe school districts play a significant role on the sense of neighborhood and have experienced the negative consequences of neighborhoods that are split and sent to different elementaries- this is the case in Hope Valley Farms where half go to Hope Valley elementary and half to Southwest. Because so many family interactions in the elementary years are through children's school friends, it is sad when children in the same physical neighborhood do not become friends. This illustration points to the challenge of creating a feeling of neighborhood schools and our other goal, diversity.

Another way to create diversity is with our magnet choices. I am a proponent of magnets because I believe Americans are being encouraged to seek out school choice – education is becoming a market driven enterprise as is evidenced by the growth of private, charter, home-school and even on-line learning. I believe DPS is moving in the right direction in opening our most recent magnet choices, WG Pearson elementary and middle school. To create the desired diversity, it is crucial that magnets be promoted to all segments of our community and I believe DPS has accomplished this with events like the well-attended magnet fair and our technology fair. Constructive criticism levied against the system 3-4 years back has been addressed with stronger publicity efforts and I believe evidence of this is in the increased diversity of our most popular magnet, DSA. I do believe that we must do a better job at informing our constituents on how magnet funding is secured and on how charter schools effect funding.

To this end, I am advocating that our budget development process be more inclusive. I have participated on the budget advisory committee and the experience was valuable. I would like to see additional members added including parent representatives who would be charged with and supported in sharing information about the work. I would also like to see pre-budget planning meetings held at a traditional middle school by geographic area, and facilitated by staff, so that constituents are familiar with the budget development process and can have input early on. These meetings could be compared to Coffee With Council. I know this will enhance our desire to have the community on board when it comes time to advocate for the budget to our County Commissioners.

As growth and overcrowding will continue to be concerns for our community, I do believe it is appropriate that the at-large member of the School Board shares sensitivity for this situation. Our family has been in an overcrowded elementary for the last 8 years so I can empathize with my neighbors at a schools like Creekside and Jordan and those folks up in Northern and Eastern Durham where growth is healthy to say the least. The reality is, based on projections by student assignment and Facilities management, that all of our current schools will be at or over capacity in the near future. I was unable to secure answers in time to questions regarding time tables for new construction, but must compliment DPS for the helpful documentation regarding renovations, maintenance and construction available on the website. In areas experiencing overcrowding, we need to work collaboratively to understand what is attracting families to schools that are overcrowded with the goal of replicating those incentives at nearby elementaries that are either just under or at capacity. Inevitably until we have new construction, we are going to have schools that struggle with overcrowding but I don't believe any one school should shoulder an undue burden.

Finally, because mobile classroom units will most likely be around for awhile, it is imperative that we insure equality between schools in terms of the age of the unit, and the necessary amenities like paved sidewalks, covered walkways and fencing to insure safety. My PTA at Hope Valley brought this very issue to the attention of DPS.

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?

First let me say that we are incredibly fortunate to have El Centro as a member of our community. They are represented on the RBA I mentioned earlier and many of us at the table are being educated about specific needs of Latino families.

Latino youth give many of the same reasons as drop outs give for leaving the system: need to earn money, feelings of isolation, ill equipped to handle the demands of the curriculum and a lack of relevance. I know this from working with Latinos in my AVID program. I believe many of the same solutions we have put in place for dropouts will serve these children as well: small high schools, work-study, and community support. One striking difference between Latinos and other children as divulged in a survey conducted by Public Health is a high percentage of thoughts of suicide and bouts of lasting depression. My heart aches when I hear this and I challenge our community to closely examine how we can better support our Latino youth. My work at the Center for Peace Education headquartered in Carrboro, allowed me to work with students on developing programs to combat racism and prejudice and to support them in implementing their programs in settings such as schools, neighborhoods or places of worship. The teen leadership component of Capturing Kids Hearts begins to address the need for youth to work together at tearing down barriers to exclusivity that we often find in schools especially during the teen years. My thoughts are that Latino teens are vulnerable to these realities.

As a community, we must learn more about the Dream Act, which would allow children born in the US to illegal parents to attend college with contingencies. We must be open to discussing this and determine where we stand as a community because our Latino youth will be discouraged from giving their best if they have no hope for higher education.

I also believe that the new Holton School, which will focus on technical careers, will benefit Latino students.

As mentioned earlier, we need to be sure our Latino families are included in our efforts to educate minorities on all of the magnet choices, small high schools, and various pathways available in high school.

All of our students need to see themselves celebrated in our standard curriculum and need to have role models with whom to identify. We need to evaluate our teaching resources to insure that this is the case and should ask our teachers if they need additional training in this and other areas associated with knowledge of the Latino history and culture. We have many resources in our community to accomplish these goals. An example of a strong partnership is Duke's commitment to offering Spanish to teachers and including them in a trip to a South American county in the summer. We also need to focus on recruiting Latino teachers. In place at one of our high schools is an elective for students who believe they would like to go into teaching. The NEA has a program called, Teacher Cadets. I would like to support teachers who would like to implement this program and would encourage them to reach out to Latino youth. This program sets students up for applying to the highly regarded Teaching Fellows program that pays for college at a UNC school. This is also an effective recruitment tool, as many of our own students will come back to Durham where they were supported in entering their teaching career.

Finally, related to what we can do in school, I do believe we are doing a solid job of providing a quality education for Latino youth at the elementary school, however, we

need to be sure to fund ESL teachers and must research models to use them effectively as co-teachers and instructional leaders, versus just for pull out programs.

Through my work with PTA, we have tried to be more inclusive. A simple tool is provided by DPS – headsets that allow a translator’s voice to be heard in real time. We use these at all of our meetings. Also, insuring that all notices and voice mails are in Spanish as well as English has helped. Finally, encouraging schools to hold cultural celebrations that recognize the diversity of our student population is a simple strategy supported by PTA.

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

Again, while at the Durham Public Education Network, my focus was on working with the community to understand the challenges of recruitment and retention. The scary reality is that we are in competition for a shrinking supply of teachers especially in areas such as foreign language, and exceptional children specialists. We have increased our local supplement and that is important however, as we have learned from the administration of the Teaching Quality Survey, an initiative of Governor Easley and supported by a myriad of groups including the PTA and NC Teachers Association, there are other areas that are important to teachers and I do think that DPS is addressing some of those areas. For example, teachers nationwide desire more time to plan collaboratively; implementation of PLC and early release days help to achieve this goal. Teachers desire opportunities to be leaders and equal players in structuring school to meet the needs of children. The PBS model is an example of how this need is met as well as equal footing on Site Base teams and School Improvement teams.

Information garnered from the TQ survey has proven incredibly useful in other school districts for driving things like staff development and school restructuring. I am concerned that Durham only had 51% participation on the last administration in 2006. As a board member I would insure that Central office is doing everything possible to help teachers in understanding the power of the survey and in supporting them in finding time to take the survey as well as insuring their privacy in candidly answering.

We are very fortunate in Durham to be able to implement a New Teacher Mentoring program and are really ahead of many of our surrounding counties in conducting what is now known to be one of the most effective strategies at retaining teachers. I do believe we need to do a better job of advertising this initiative in order to assure continued funding and community support from partners like Duke University.

Celebrations, like the one for teachers who earn their National Board certification, and the Teacher of the Year Dinner, are an example of the kinds of things we need to expand. I will advocate for recognition and partnership for our Professional teaching organizations such as the Durham Association of Educators and the Women in Education Sorority, Delta Kappa Gamma, to which I have been inducted, and whose International President is our neighbor at UNC. These associations can play a crucial role in providing the sense of professionalism and connection teachers’ desire.

Teachers also express a desire to be recognized for their professionalism. While at DPEN, I oversaw the Teacher Initiative grants program. This program no longer exists but was so appreciated by teachers that I would work with the community to find an agency that could solicit support for the grants and administer the program.

Finally, business support does exist for teachers. Currently DPS teachers receive a discount card for many area merchants. Having been a part of this at DPEN, I would like to see this expanded.

It has been my pleasure to answer your questions as thoroughly and thoughtfully as possible. I have enjoyed researching to deepen my knowledge base on the programs currently in effect in DPS and on those that might find their way into our system. I look forward to meeting with you.