

James C. Nickols

SUPPORT SCHOOLS NOW

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WJC SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATES

Please answer each question below and EXPLAIN your answers in a DETAILED manner:

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1. How will you determine how much to request in WJC Schools' operating and capital budgets? What role will the county's budget guidance play in your decision making? Are you willing to create a "budget of need" that may request funds beyond which the county says is available?

RESPONSE:

Building the budget for the school division is a collaborative effort among the faculty, staff, administration and among the School Board, the Williamsburg City Council and the James City County Board of Supervisors. The budget, ideally, is a requirements-driven-spending plan. In a zero based budget process, there is an accompanying rationale for why each item is in the budget. The Virginia Code requires the School Board to prepare a budget of needs and with that comes the responsibility to keep in view the revenue base. It is important to discern a "want" from a "need." The School Board must be attuned to the "biggest bang for the buck."

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2. Are you committed to creating a budget for WJC Schools such that teachers' salaries (as well as salaries of other support staff such as teacher assistants, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, etc.) are highly competitive with divisions in our region of the state as well as divisions across the state in areas with financial resources similar to our own (as measured by the state's "composite index")?

RESPONSE:

In crafting a responsible budget, it is important to place salaries in the context of the entire financial system. Having written that, it is vital to a quality school division to retain and recruit quality teachers and staff. Therefore, it is important to keep abreast of the compensation packages surrounding Williamsburg-James City County, throughout the Commonwealth, in the mid-Atlantic region and around the nation.

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3. Are you committed to creating a budget for WJC Schools so that schools are fully staffed and space is available (primarily in permanent buildings, not trailers) to keep class sizes down?

RESPONSE:

There are a myriad of variables to consider in order to create an environment where teaching and learning are the best. Long-range planning is a critical component in the process to consider and weigh the variables. The formula used to determine when to build another school (or schools) is another factor. It is important to make decisions carefully, but in a timely manner. It is important to avoid seeking short-cuts in order to expedite the process to make up for lost time because decisions were delayed. All of this winds up costing more money in the end. The better the environment is the better the learning.

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4. Are you satisfied with the school division's financial management? Do you believe that the school division spends funds effectively and efficiently or do you believe there is significant wasteful spending?

RESPONSE:

There is always room for improving the financial management of an organization. There seemed to have been some unnecessary costs due to delays in making decisions (e.g., Matoaka Elementary School – the rush to make up for lost time in order to get the facility on line for the new school year). The members of the School Board have the fiduciary responsibility to scrutinize the budget so that the taxpayer, the parent, the student, the teacher, and the staff are getting the best resources to accomplish the mission for every dollar received.

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5. What is your vision of the relationship that should exist between the Board of Supervisors and the School Board? What is your perception of the relationship that exists today? If elected, would you change this relationship that exists? If so, how?

RESPONSE:

It takes effort to maintain any relationship. I am committed to maintaining and strengthening a collaborative partnership among the City of Williamsburg, James City County's Board of Supervisors and the School Board.

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6. Under what conditions should the School Board allow the Board of Supervisors to direct educational policy by placing conditions on funding?

RESPONSE:

The Board of Supervisors is the appropriating body. They are the taxing authority. The School Board's responsibility is to set policy and to enforce the policy. The School Board is charged with the responsibility to do its homework in crafting a needs-based-spending plan. In the development of the spending plan, there must be open, honest, and respectful communication among all involved in the process. In the end, the School Board must adjust its spending plan based upon the economic realities of the City of Williamsburg and James City County.

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7. Do you support the school division's efforts to expand preschool opportunities for at-risk students? Would you support with additional preschool expansion in collaboration with private preschools and the state?

RESPONSE:

I support preschool opportunities. The research indicates that we are investing wisely when we provide developmentally appropriate education to pre-kindergarten children. I will look carefully at pre-school opportunities and ways to collaborate with other institutions that may have the resources that the school division is unable to provide.

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8. If recommended by the Alternative Education Task Force, would you support requesting funds in the capital budget for a facility to house alternative education programs for students long-term suspended or expelled and those who learn better in an environment outside of regular schools?

RESPONSE:

If the mission is to assist the child in learning and achieving his or her highest potential so that the child may become a positive member of the workforce, then the money invested to this end will be money wisely spent. It is important that every child in the public school system be approached with respect (whether or not is it returned). The factors that govern a child's behavior are: the family system, the child's health, the child's learning modality, the school environment (how the child is spoken to, does the child feel that she or he is being heard, the facility in which instruction is offered, the quality of the resources available as good as other schools), etc.

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9. What two or three criteria do you think should guide any future redistricting scheme? Name them and explain why.

RESPONSE:

This first criterion that comes to mind is to have a socio-economic balance. It is a formative experience for young people to be able to relate to each other – striving for the ideal here – without regard to race, gender, religion, or economic background. The first criterion is important, but a second criterion is the neighborhood. It is important to find a balance between socio-economic ideals and the integrity of the neighborhood.

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10. Which method do you support to meet the increasing student population: expanding existing schools or building new schools?

RESPONSE:

I want to avoid an "either or" response. When a school is built for 650, the cafeteria, the gym, the lavatories, the library, the offices, the classrooms, hvac system, etc. are built with that maximum number in mind. When the student population exceeds that number, the stress on the system is tremendous. How to re-engineer the facility becomes a huge challenge that may or may not cost more than building a new facility; that would require careful study. On the other hand, building a new facility offers the opportunity to construct a facility using more energy efficient materials, incorporate the latest technology, etc. Bottom-line – the issue needs study. Should there be a standard blue print for a school? I am not sure. I want to listen to the pro and cons and read any literature on the subject.

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11. What do you think the maximum enrollment capacities should be for elementary, middle and high schools?

RESPONSE:

Based on the research that I have surveyed: 600 range for elementary schools; 700-800 for middle school; and 1,200 for a high school

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12. How familiar are you in general with the operation of the school division and how well do you think you understand the challenges it faces?

RESPONSE:

I hope that my responses to these detailed and complex questions offer the insight into my commitment to grow in my understanding of the school division and the challenges that the division and the community face. I will remain a student of the organization and draw upon my professional training to be a positive contributor to the School Board, the school division and the community. I will listen carefully and respond thoughtfully.

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