

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR JCPS SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATE

Candidate Name: Elizabeth Berfield

Age: 29

Campaign Facebook Page: www.facebook.com/eberfield

Education :

Indian Creek Consolidated School District, near Waterman, IL. K-12

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
B.A. History, December 2004

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
M.S. Library and Information Science, December 2006

Employment

I am a former librarian, and I have been a household manager since my family's 2008 relocation to Louisville.

How long have you lived in Louisville/Jefferson County?

I have lived here for 4 years, and in District 2 the entire time.

Do/did your children attend Jefferson County Public Schools? When and what schools?

My daughter will enter kindergarten in the fall of 2013, and we plan to tour our JCPS options as soon as possible.

What type of volunteer work have you done within JCPS?

I have not had the opportunity to volunteer within JCPS. I volunteered in the library of our nearest parochial elementary school for a short period.

Why are you running for JCPS School Board?

This election clearly has the potential to significantly change the future of public education in our community. I am dedicated to creating high-achieving schools and putting enriching educational opportunities within reach of all students in our community. I strive to be a fair, educated, and compassionate voice in the divisive debate over our student-assignment policy. As District 2 is a traditionally diverse middle ground in our county, I hope to earn the distinction of being the best candidate to wisely and cooperatively navigate the issues that the next elected Jefferson County Board of Education will face.

What are the top three issues facing JCPS and how will you work to address them?

The chief issue we need to face is vastly improving student achievement across the board, from primary education through graduation. We need to call upon parents to do their best to send their children to school primed for learning, and secure the best resources for their classrooms. My secondary goal is promoting greater fiscal responsibility for the district. We need to seriously reduce our administrative and transportation costs. JCPS cannot provide better schools and services without first reducing our waste. Third, the Board will need to collectively address the issue of busing and student-assignment, as it

threatens to polarize our community. It is no small task, but the stability of our school system depends on transitioning the district to a long-term resolution of this issue.

What do you think of the job that Dr. Donna Hargens has done as Superintendent?

Given the circumstances that she inherited, I think she is off to a positive start. I am pleased to see her initiative in reducing unnecessary administrative positions and spending.

What do you think of the current student assignment plan? Would you change it? How?

I think we need to significantly reduce the amount of busing that occurs in our current plan. It is a costly burden, adds risk to students' safety, reduces the level of parental involvement for many families, and takes a toll on our environment. Possibly allowing more students to attend schools closer to home, and simply encouraging organized carpools, can lessen our dependence on busing. However, I would not support implementing any fundamental change in our current policy unless we fully commit to first transforming schools in areas that have been underserved in our past.

How do you define "neighborhood" schools, and do you think JCPS should move to neighborhood schools? What advantages and disadvantages do you see with neighborhood schools?

Many candidates often use the term "neighborhood schools" loosely, which can be confusing in this election and in our school district's future. In my personal case, I would consider my daughter's future reside elementary school, which is fortunately about .5 miles from my home, to be our neighborhood school. However, District 2 is a densely populated yet geographically small district, and I still consider other schools within a handful of miles to be within our neighborhood. I fully realize that this is not the case in other areas of our county.

We know that parental involvement is key to early student achievement, and neighborhood schools can facilitate participation. We can reduce busing costs and liability, while restoring community pride around their schools. Children and their families could see great health benefits from being able to walk or bike to school together. However, we need to fully recognize and account for the areas of our city that have schools that are not up to par, and have been disadvantaged in our past. We need to think seriously about the effects such a shift could have on diversity within our schools. I would demand a sensitive plan that firstly addresses the needs of underprivileged neighborhoods if a policy change was ever proposed.

If JCPS moved to neighborhood schools, how would you accommodate parents who do not wish to send their children to the school designated as their neighborhood school?

If JCPS were ever to adopt a neighborhood schools policy, we must preserve our wonderful magnet, traditional, and optional programs for those looking for alternatives. I am sure there will also be certain circumstances that would permit students to attend schools in other neighborhoods as well, since our population and school capacities are not always parallel.

What would you do to improve low performing schools within JCPS?

These are schools and students that require the intervention of not just our school board and teachers, but our community. Simply changing the staffing at a low-achieving school has not proved effective in the past, and constantly disrupts any stability within that school. Overhauls only give the appearance of action, but do not address the fact that teachers and administrators are not the only ones responsible for student performance. Instead, I propose a dual approach. First, underperforming schools should be targeted for staffing improvements through an incentives program. In addition, we need to address the reasons why many of these students are unprepared for reaching their potential while in the

classroom through expanded mentoring and literacy programs in these schools. The greatest value of a quality education is that it can lift students above of issues of poverty, violence, and indifference.

What would you do to increase parental involvement within JCPS?

Many parents have forgotten how critical they are in the learning process. Parents need to prepare our youngest learners with basic learning and behavioral skills, and continue to be an active voice and participant in their education. We need more volunteers to encourage students that do not receive such support at home. For low-achieving schools, I would love to see joint learning experiences for both parents and students. Some of today's parents do not have the skills needed to assist their own children with their studies, and we need to help these families succeed together.

How would you bring back the parents who have left the district for other counties, private schools, or homeschooling?

We can consider adding programs that are currently in demand in private schools, such as an optional half-day kindergarten, to appeal to many parents that choose to not even start kindergarten in JCPS. However, I do not think we should be competing for students. Our private schools, especially parochial schools, are often embedded in the history and tradition of their neighborhoods, and they need students as much as we do to survive. If parents have chosen home schooling or private options to avoid JCPS, then I hope they will return when they see acceptable progress. However, we need to recognize that these are often personal decisions and appreciate that we have a wide range of public and private choices to serve our community.

What issues outside of the classroom do you feel impact performance most? How would you work to mitigate those issues?

I feel of course that the aforementioned role of parental involvement is critical to a student's overall success in education, and in life. It is important to remember that there are unstable households in every corner of our county, and this is a not a situation that is limited to a specific area or socio-economic group. This community has many vulnerable and impressionable students that grow up amidst conditions such as poverty, violence, and substance abuse. We also have students for whom English may not be their first language, and their parents may not be fluent enough to help the children with their schoolwork. I would work with local resources to address these problems and promote positive learning environments outside of the classroom. However, our schools and teachers cannot be expected to address and solve these issues on our own, while taking away time and resources from providing quality instruction. We need our city and state leaders to step up and deal with many of these community issues, and take a relentless role in reducing crime and drug use in our community.

Have you read the JCPS Vision 2015 strategic plan? What are your thoughts on the plan? How would you change the plan or work to support it?

I have read it, and I am impressed with the goals that are present in the four focus areas. If the given strategies can achieve even a substantial portion of these goals, our students and this community will have a much brighter future. However, we have seen many plans throughout the years that fail to yield anything more than well-meaning goals in a document. With enhanced teamwork of the Board, teachers, administrators and parents, we will hopefully begin to see considerable student gains in all subject areas and graduation readiness.

What would you do to improve the image of JCPS, both inside the county and outside?

We need to focus on improving curriculum, instruction, and overall student achievement. When we see significant progress, our image will be greatly improved. If we make quality schools our priority, and the results will reward us all. Trying to simply improve our image without addressing the core issues would be nothing more than a bandage.

What will you do to address bullying within JCPS?

I had a terrible time throughout high school, and I still remember how cruel other students can be. Bullying, by any young person or adult, should never be accepted in our schools and buses. When cases are documented and serious in nature, I believe parents should be able to transfer their afflicted child to a safer environment, and there should be consequences for the aggressor. Parents also need to take their role seriously, and teach their children to treat others with respect and kindness, and enforce these basic principles at home. I would love to see a "Community Action" type of optional program, which would focus on peace, environmental, and community activism. A haven for students that pledge to reject violence, and strive to learn in a peaceful learning place would be ideal for those who believe as strongly as I do that bullying is extremely harmful.

What is your opinion of the JCTA (Teacher's Union)?

With thousands of JCPS workers deserving representation, I believe that labor unions do have a rightful place in our district. I fully support our teachers, and it is up to them as to whether the JCTA is meeting their needs, and if they are content with their representation. There are valid issues that some members have with JCTA, and I would encourage open discourse within their organization.

How will you work to improve dropout rates?

This year our state took a key step by voting in favor of raising the dropout age from 16 to 18 years of age. Students must make the vital connection between what they learn in school, and how it applies to their post-graduation ambitions. Whether through job co-ops and training or college preparation, students need to see graduation as the most critical measure they can take to achieve future success. Parents need to do all they can to keep their children in school, and encourage them even if they fall behind. I think JCPS currently offers several wonderful opportunities, such as TAPP, that give hope to non-traditional students. I would like to expand the presence of basic learning centers for students that are at risk of dropping out, or have fallen significantly behind, with focused attention on instruction and life guidance.

Do you support a charter schools? Why or why not?

I am not in favor of introducing charter schools to Louisville at this point. While there are elements that may provide success if implemented, perhaps in low-achieving schools by our own system and teachers, I do not see fit to direct our public school funding into these ventures. Charter school results are quite mixed, and I am concerned with any publicly funded school or organization that operates with little transparency.

What will you do to address state budget shortfalls and their impact on JCPS?

I believe that our system needs to take a firm stance against wasteful spending, and push the savings back to educating students and improving our schools.

-First, I would like to see a cap on high-paid administrative salaries. We also need to cut any of these positions that do not have a substantial impact on student achievement.

-Second, for the benefit of students and their families, we may need to consider reducing excess busing. The savings on fuel, maintenance, and wages would be substantial. We currently bus close to 70% of our students, which is far over the national average (~55%). Also, our cost per rider appears to be much higher than the national average (~\$900). We need to focus on reducing our costs and sheer number of students that are bused.

-Third, we need to stop the wasteful practice of paying outside firms or consultants outlandish fees for basic surveys, studies, and services. Many current workers or college interns are able to perform the same responsibilities we are highly compensating others for. The savings should go to fund teachers aides and other critical classroom support workers.

I would also hope to see our state and community garner funds to address circumstances beyond the control of the school system. We know there are many conditions in homes and our society that greatly impact the readiness to learn of many of our students, and JCPS should not be held responsible for solely funding or meeting these concerns.

What do you think of the job JCPS does to prepare parents for choosing and enrolling their children in the system? What would you do to change the process?

I can certainly understand how the current process may be frustrating and confusing to many applicants. My husband and I are currently evaluating our daughter's kindergarten options for the 2013-2014 school year, and it is difficult to understand certain aspects. For example, we can apply to any of our cluster options, yet we have heard that we have a zero to very slim chance of getting into certain schools within our cluster. I think parents should have valid options and not just unrealistic chances when presented with school choices. I have heard many conflicting answers, from both JCPS representatives and parents, over how school applications are handled. I agree with the sentiment that customer service can be severely lacking when navigating the JCPS phone lines, and I seldom find the information or answers I am looking for on the main website. We need to continue to streamline the process for applicants, and provide accurate answers to each inquiry.

What do you think the public's perception of the Board of Education is? What will you do to either change or strengthen that perception?

I think that many people are often unaware of how significant the Board is, and the power it has in shaping the future of our community through improving public education. As a candidate, and as a potential Board member, I want to be accessible and hear from all people affected by our schools. I would like to gather ideas and concerns from students, parents, teachers, and neighbors. This election is critical, and I hope voters take the time to research and contemplate their candidate choice. Our future elected Board officials will hopefully reflect the diverse composition of our community, and provide greater representation of their constituents.

Do you believe that all JCPS Board of Education sessions, including the evaluation of the superintendent, should be open to the press and public? If not, what issues should be discussed in closed session and why?

While closed executive sessions are currently lawful for preliminary superintendent evaluations, I feel that greater trust can be earned when publicly elected bodies provide transparent and accessible information to taxpayers. The final review should always remain public.

How will you make yourself accessible to the community as a school board member?

I consider myself to be a very fair, reasonable, and open person. I enjoy hearing concerns, ideas, and visions from all. I would certainly make myself available to those who wished to communicate with me, and email, phone, or parent town-hall meetings are three options.

Some Kentucky state legislators are saying that evolution should not be taught in classrooms. What is your stance on teaching evolution in the classroom? Do you feel that Intelligent Design should be taught in the classroom as a valid alternative to evolution? Why or why not?

We should certainly not dilute fact-based information in public education to simply appease a small dissenting group. We need to strengthen our curriculum and standards, not weaken the knowledge our students should gain while in the classroom. I could understand covering Intelligent Design within a religious studies class, but not as an alternative to evolution in public school science instruction. Our community is fortunate to have many religious school choices available to parents that choose to focus on a faith-based learning environment.