

#Vote4DCKids Forum Audience Questions

Cassandra Gentry, Ward 6 grandparent

What or how will you prepare our schools for changes in population with all the new developments (class sizes, transportation, etc.); instead of closing schools with low enrollment?

My [Plan for Public Education as a Right](#) would ensure that every school and every student has the resources they need to succeed. That includes a school budget model based on student needs, not just enrollment, to invest in schools holistically and make sure every school has the resources and staff necessary to support our students. Enrollment-based funding will never achieve equity in education as it fails to prioritize student needs and risks more school closures that undermine student stability.

We also need increased coordination with regard to new schools that are opening to ensure we are not creating instability for students. This should be done in part by requiring the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education to submit an annual Master Facilities Plan that meets the [requirements of the law](#) and documents and addresses school facility needs to ensure the vitality and success of all DC public schools. If the Plan again [fails to meet the law](#), the DC Council should disapprove the Plan and require resubmission.

Overcrowding is a real issue in some communities and under enrollment is an issue in others, and I support convening a student assignment and boundary review process. I understand the importance and urgency required of this task. At-Large Councilmember Christina Henderson has introduced the Attendance Zone Boundaries Amendment Act of 2022, which would require a comprehensive review of boundaries and feeder patterns every ten years beginning in 2024. The DC Council will play an important role in monitoring and overseeing this work if and when the bill becomes law.

Finally, my [Safe Streets Infrastructure & Public Transportation Plan](#) calls for measures to lower transit barriers for parents and students including expanding Kids Ride Free to automatically mail SmarTrip cards to every eligible public and public charter school student in DC (instead of requiring school coordination and pickup), allowing elementary students attending Title One schools receive a Parents Ride Free card that allows them to accompany their child, and explicitly encouraging use of these cards outside of school hours.

DaSean Jones, Ward 8 parent

The pandemic hurt the at-risk and lower income demographics and stimulus funding in 2022 were provided for accelerated learning recovery and support students' SEL development. How do we continue to support accelerated learning and SEL development due to the long-standing effects of learning loss from the pandemic?

The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated gaps and increased the baseline of what students and schools need to thrive, worsening our existing failures to meet needs. Our leaders have continually failed to be sufficiently ambitious in per-pupil funding. The current Council Chair proposed increasing school funding for next year [at significantly less than the rate of inflation](#) – in effect proposing a cut in funding for our schools. In addition, for years, our school system has misspent millions of dollars designated to help DC's most vulnerable students, directing money that should be dedicated to students classified as "at-risk" to instead cover day-to-day costs. Unlike the current Council Chair, who was the [only Councilmember to vote against librarians](#) for every DC public school, I believe every student deserves a school that can provide a joyful education that includes arts, music, and libraries.

Our children deserve high-quality social and emotional supports, including highly-qualified mental health practitioners. I oppose efforts to lower standards to allow less qualified and uncertified practitioners to work with our children. Instead, we need to seek ways to make these jobs more stable and attractive for highly-qualified candidates, including additional funding for school-based mental health services.

Finally, DC has received an unprecedented infusion of federal funding. Our spending of those funds has proceeded with very little oversight or planning, and a significant amount of those funds remain unspent. I intend to engage in vigorous oversight to ensure that every penny of that money is spent to maximize its usefulness. Our Council and educational leadership have a track record of misusing and wasting precious resources, and what happened with [Americorps](#) and [Head Start](#) grants cannot happen with federal relief funds.

Caroline Pahaham, Ward 4 parent

Right now children can get mental health supports if they are in crisis and it is apparent in school. When parents say that their child needs help, they are told the child is fine in school. Would you be willing to put forth legislation saying any member of the community (family, teacher, support staff) can ask for supports for a student in need?

I am eager to act to make sure everyone has the ability to receive mental health supports, including through legislation and oversight. As someone who has a non-visible disability, I know firsthand the importance of care and support without barriers or expectations of what need

might look like. I trust our students and families regarding their needs, and I am committed to meeting those needs.

We need to lower barriers to mental health care for everyone in our community – students, caregivers, and families. I support efforts both inside and outside schools to improve access to mental health care for our communities. I am committed to ensuring that mental health supports are easily accessible for every DC resident.

Mable Boler, Ward 6 grandparent

I would like to know what can be done to bring the quality of public education to the same standard as the charter schools without taking 20 years?

All of our public schools – charter or traditional public schools – should provide high-quality education to every student. The standards for performance, transparency, and oversight should be the same. I believe in holistic assessments of school quality that do not penalize schools for the makeup of the student population. We have schools in both sectors that perform extremely well on some measures and poorly on others. I am committed to ensure that every school in every sector is safe, joyful, fully-resourced, and well-run. You can read more about my proposals in my [Plan for Public Education as a Right](#).

Kisha Clark, Ward 6 parent

How can you work with the DME to increase seats, offer a way for families to be in OST programs together? How would financial aid and vouchers work to make OST programs more affordable? Would you use a sliding scale?

As a parent of three school-aged children, I know the challenges of affording and getting into high-quality out of school time programs. We have to increase our funding for out of school time programming to support students beyond the school day and ensure equitable access to quality programming, especially during this critical time when lives have been disrupted.

We know that for working families, the school day from 9 a.m. - 3 p.m. does not match the reality of the care and support that children need or that our community can and should provide. We have to find ways to ensure families have high-quality support systems for the full day. I believe that students, families, and school communities benefit from stability and, as a parent, I know the benefit of providing those programs in the schools where the families are already present every day.

Building programming within schools can also reduce the financial, administrative, and logistical burdens associated with vouchers. We know that means testing, like a sliding scale, or vouchers can complicate systems, increase administrative costs, and put up barriers to access –

particularly for families with undocumented parents and students with precarious living situations. Rather than make them prove their eligibility or travel across town, I support moving beyond a “sliding scale” to consider out of school time programming part of our public education system and free to families. I realize it will take significant effort and focus to make that happen, but we should set it as our goal.

Scott Goldstein, Ward 4 parent

A lot of DC teachers are also parents themselves. When I became a parent, working so many nights and weekends as a teacher became unsustainable - and it’s one of the reasons I left teaching. What would you do to support and retain specifically educators who also have children?

I’d like to begin by sharing my [DC Council Accountability Plan](#) – the first ever comprehensive, evidence-based plan to build a more effective, modern, and ethical Council of the District of Columbia – and my [Plan for Public Education as a Right](#) – which provides detailed proposals to fully fund our public schools, conduct real education oversight, and support safe and healthy school buildings.

Importantly, these Plans are informed by my experience as a parent in DC, with three children in a public charter school. On a very personal level, I can tell you that my children’s educators’ working conditions are critical to their learning conditions. They rise and fall together. Supporting and retaining good teachers is good for our teachers, our schools, and our children. Taken together, these Plans provide important information regarding my values and proposals for how the DC Council can strengthen our public schools.

With regard to teacher retention, we know what works to recruit and retain teachers – starting with better pay and benefits. The idea that any teacher at a publicly-funded school would struggle to afford to live in DC is a travesty and contributes to high teacher turnover. One critical way to help close this gap is to make it easier for teachers at charter schools to form and join unions. People of color benefit from unions: evidence shows that the union wage premium is [significantly higher for workers of color](#) than white workers.

I also support “Grow Your Own” programs that encourage and support members of our community to study education and enter the profession – especially paraprofessionals who are already working in our schools. These programs should include scholarships to help overcome any financial hardships to entering the profession, include supports for achieving required teacher certifications (which can include childcare), and have a strong mentorship component. Nevada has invested \$9 million in a pathway program for paraprofessionals to be trained to become teachers, adding 425 pre-service educators to their local teaching workforce. There are

best practices and programs we can assess for DC, and my [DC Council Accountability Plan](#) calls for more resources to allow the Council to do just that.

While pay and workplace culture are essential, I also know that representation matters in hiring, training, and retaining new staff. I saw firsthand in my career as a lawyer in a law firm and with the federal Judiciary that having a woman on the hiring committee makes a difference in women being hired and staying in the job. Having mentors with similar backgrounds provides a necessary support structure and sounding board that improves retention.

Finally, data is extremely important in addressing many of our education issues, and DC is playing catchup in many regards. The Office of the State Superintendent of Education recently started sharing more information on teachers across the District's public schools. You can now access teacher retention, experience, and demographic information by school on the Office's website. While this new access gives us a great tool for monitoring and oversight, unfortunately, we do not yet have many years of this data available like in other districts. We can learn from successful ways other jurisdictions have used these tools, however, to encourage recruitment and retention of diverse, representative, and high-quality educators.

For example, researchers at [George Mason used similar data from Fairfax](#), in combination with teacher application data, to find that even after accounting for advanced degrees and experience, white teachers were more likely to be hired than Black teachers. These findings are both painful and unsurprising and yet unexplored and undocumented in the District.

As Council Chairwoman, I will ensure that we continue to use both oversight and legislation to monitor the recruitment and retention of educators across our public schools and adjust our practices as needed in response. This could be through oversight or, for example, through legislation that requires detailed plans, to be approved by the DC Council, from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education for making progress on this important work. Importantly, I commit to always including educator voices in these efforts and being responsive to their needs. We will not increase retention without teacher voices as a foundation for this work.

Tracy Barnes, Ward 5 parent

In the wake of what happened yesterday (May 24, 2022) in Texas, what safety measures will be added in our public schools (charters included) to protect our children and school staff?

As a mother to three children, I know how shocked and horrified we all have been over what happened in Texas. When I was in high school in Colorado, the Columbine shooting took place and the trauma rippled through our communities. The decades of inaction since then sit heavy on my heart. It is impossible for any parent to watch their children go through the schoolhouse door these last couple of weeks and not feel anger, fear, and frustration.

DC has among the strictest gun laws in the country, banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, as well as prohibiting the open carry of firearms. The District also has background checks, domestic violence protections, and concealed carry permits. But we know guns find their way into the District from other jurisdictions. We fall victim to weak gun laws in other states and weak interstate gun interdiction efforts that allow guns to enter DC. I will continue to fight to change them and for us to have voting representation in those decisions. I am the only candidate in this race that can proudly say that I have not been and never will be a member or employee of the National Rifle Association that has worked so hard to weaken our gun laws.

I support the efforts of the Office of the Attorney General to tackle ghost guns, including suing ghost gun manufacturers. I would also be open to private right of action laws like those [recently proposed in California](#) to allow citizens to sue gun manufacturers. We also need a coordinated push across states for national action on gun control and gun violence that includes banning semiautomatic assault weapons, military-style .50 caliber rifles, handguns, and large-capacity magazines and reinstating the federal prohibition on assault weapons and large-capacity magazines. I also will work with and for Virginia lawmakers who seek to toughen their gun laws – as their state [is the primary source of illegal guns](#) in the District of Columbia.

All DC residents deserve safe, stable, and secure communities. We know the safest communities are the ones with resources and stability. As long as people’s basic needs remain unmet – things like secure and stable housing, healthy food, high-quality healthcare, and economic security through education and employment – our city will not be as safe as it could be. Making our communities safer will require sustained, intentional investments in violence prevention and intervention in communities that have faced longstanding disinvestment, including trauma-informed support for communities impacted by violence. We must focus on preventing and intervening – and not just reacting – to violence to address the root causes of violence and strengthen our communities. Concentrating our efforts on reacting to violence has [cost DC billions of dollars](#) and failed to result in safer communities. [DC residents broadly support](#) investing in support for our neighbors and violence prevention and intervention to keep our communities safe.

My [Plan for Safe, Stable and Secure Communities](#) is a sound, data-driven, coordinated Plan to make our entire community safer, not just schools. As DC Council Chairwoman, I will lead the Council in following the facts and the science, whether it’s public health-based approaches to violence prevention and intervention, time studies that make sure we are using police efficiently and well, and holding our public safety agencies to the highest standards.

Ana Rodriguez, Ward 5 parent

What role will you play in the lack of educational opportunities for our youth, especially since the rise of youth violence?

I again start from the position of [public education as a right](#). All DC residents are entitled to high-quality, equitable public education. Our government must support the entire ecosystem of public education so that every student at every age can grow, learn, and succeed. Yet, we've seen repeated failures to support our public schools, including a lack of school nurses and librarians, school closures, and unsafe school buildings. Instead of conducting robust oversight over our schools, the current Council Chair unilaterally dissolved the standalone Committee on Education.

Year after year, our current Council Chair waits for education issues like funding for our public schools to be in crisis before dealing with them. Despite the hard work of many Councilmembers, the DC Council is limited in considering education holistically and across government agencies, negatively impacting safe and healthy school buildings. We all pay the price for these failures, particularly families in Wards 5, 7, and 8 that have the majority of public school students in our city.

My [Plan for Public Education as a Right](#) proposes several measures to increase educational access for students at every stage, including fully funding and implementing the [Birth-to-Three for All DC Act](#) so that no DC family spends more than 10% of their income on child care and supporting revenue increases ([in contrast to the current Council Chair](#)) to provide a long-term, stable pay increase for early childhood educators, as well as making community college at the University of the District of Columbia free for all DC residents by expanding the [RISE \(Recovery, Intervention, Support, and Engagement\)](#) program to reduce the financial burden of college through free tuition and housing, scholarships, books, and electronic devices.