

Washington Teachers' Union Local 6, AFT, AFL-CIO DC Candidate Questionnaire, April 2016

Please return to: support@wtulocal6.net by 5pm on April 12, 2016

1. Reclaiming the Promise of Public Education in the District of Columbia

The WTU believes that our public schools represent our nation's commitment to helping all children dream their dreams and achieve them. A high-quality public education for all children is an economic necessity, an anchor of democracy, a moral imperative and fundamental civil right, without which none of our rights can be realized fully. As part of this commitment to public schools, government should uphold, enact, and fund policies that fulfill our collective obligation to help all children succeed, including policies that:

- Provide for neighborhood schools, in walking distance, that are safe, welcoming places for teaching and learning;
Do you support this policy?

Yes.
- Ensure that teachers are well-prepared, are supported, have manageable class sizes and have time to collaborate so they can meet the individual needs of every child;
Do you support this policy?

Yes.
- Make sure our children have an engaging curriculum that includes art, music and the sciences;
Do you support this policy?

Yes.
- Ensure that children have access to wraparound services to meet their social, emotional and health needs.
Do you support this policy?

Yes.

Explain how you will support these policies and ensure funding for them.

As a member of the Council's Committee on Education, I understand the importance of ensuring that our schools are easily accessible to neighborhood families, that classrooms are ideal learning environments, that our students should have access to an education that is well-rounded, and that our schools should be meeting the needs of our students in multiple ways.

Since joining the Council, I have supported policies and participated in events that attempt to address all of these issues. First, I fully support the idea that our students should have a well-rounded curriculum that includes art, music, and science. In March of this year, I co-hosted a “STEAM” day at Dorothy I. Height Elementary School. The focus of this event was to promote science, technology, engineering, arts, and math. During the event, I read to students and talked about the importance of including art into everyday curriculum. Additionally, in February of this year, I co-introduced the “District of Columbia African American Book Festival Act of 2016.” This legislation will help promote African American authors in the District and will allow for greater exposure for our students.

Additionally, one of the biggest initiatives the Council has undertaken is the modernization program. Under this program, every single DCPS school will be substantially modernized and will create an academic environment that will be conducive to both learning and instruction. As a member of the Council, I have advocated for the modernization of every school in Ward 4 and have worked closely with the Deputy Mayor for Education and the Chancellor to ensure that sufficient funding is allocated to allow for the building of schools that contain space that not only meet the needs of students, but teachers as well.

Lastly, as a member of the Committee on Education, I closely evaluated the school budgets during this fiscal year to ensure that Ward 4 schools received adequate funding for at-risk students and for wraparound services.

2. Measuring and Closing the Achievement Gap

Currently, more than 100,000 students attend our city’s public schools. The teachers, paraprofessionals and other school employees who work with these students each day care deeply about the quality of public schools and the education their students receive.

While recent press has lauded D.C. schools for growth on the NAEP assessments, the latest *Education Week* “Quality Counts” report gave District of Columbia schools an “F” based on those same assessments, underscoring an increased growth in the achievement gap from 2003-2013, 38 times the national average.

Why do you believe there is an achievement gap?

There are several factors that can affect the academic success of our students and contribute to an achievement gap. These factors can range from access to nutritious foods to access to social services to day-to-day family life. Some of these factors can be addressed by the school system through the implementation of supportive programs, while other factors can only be addressed through social programs and community engagement. In order to close the achievement gap, there must be a collective effort between both the schools and the community to ensure that all of our students are given every opportunity to succeed.

What policies would you support, and what specific new reforms do you propose to close the achievement gap between advantaged and disadvantaged students?

I have supported policies that attempt to address many of the different factors that contribute to the achievement gap. As stated previously, I believe that one of the factors that contributes to the achievement gap is access to nutritious foods. For some District students, the only meals that he or she will have is the food that is provided through their schools. Last year, I joined several members of the Committee on Education at a hearing on nutrition in our public schools. I believe that, although this is just one factor, ensuring that our schools are able to provide nutritious meals to our students is key to their academic success in the classrooms.

How are you going to ensure transparency in the budgeting process and make certain school funds (like Title I and At-Risk Funding) are being spent where they are legally required, most needed and where those funds will provide the most benefit to students?

One of the core functions of the Council is to provide oversight, including oversight over the budgeting and spending of school funds. As a member of the Council, I have worked with both the Committee on Education, the Deputy Mayor for Education, and the Chancellor to make sure our school budgeting process is clear and transparent to the public.

3. Implementing the Common Core State Standards

The WTU supports the implementation of the Common Core State Standards to address inequalities in public education and to give all students the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills they need to succeed. In order to properly implement the Common Core standards, there must be a deliberate and thoughtful plan of action for introducing new standards into schools, and making sure they are embraced by the community at large. Students need a strong, well-rounded curriculum, and teachers need the time, resources and support necessary to adapt their teaching to these ambitious new demands.

Although the district has made some strides to implement the Common Core State Standards, our members still are concerned about the quality of tools and supports for educators.

How would you ensure proper implementation of Common Core State Standards before sanctions are applied to schools, teachers and students?

I will work closely with the schools Chancellor and the State Superintendent of Education. Training our educators is vital to proper implementation, and anything less than full support is a disservice to our students.

How will you advocate for and actively support the explicit teaching of functional reading skills beginning in the early childhood years through grade 12 to ensure that DCPS graduates are literate, enabling them to become self-reliant, productive citizens?

As a member of the Council's Committee on Education, I will focus on ensuring teachers receive the resources they need. I believe early education sets children on a strong trajectory for lessening our achievement gap. We must be focused on building a city that creates a workforce that leaves no one behind

How will you support students who are behind in math to catch up to their peers and graduate with their required credits?

It is important to consider each student on a case-by-case basis. By all means necessary we should encourage students to graduate high school and provide ample resources and opportunities for the student to meet the required credit.

4. Testing and Accountability

Since *No Child Left Behind* was passed, annual standardized tests have been used to determine student proficiency levels. This testing data has been used primarily for making high-stakes decisions—reconstituting or closing schools and terminating staff. Proficiency levels have been criticized as providing inaccurate measures of the effectiveness of schools that serve students who are behind academically. For example, a school that helped all of their students learn one year of material still would have a low proficiency rating if those students had started a year or more behind grade-level.

Alternately, student growth models have been developed to determine how many years of academic growth students have made each year. Such models require that the school system has accurate measures of each student's skill mastery. This data then can be used to inform and adapt instruction. Acquiring this level of data requires tests that are adaptive — those designed to capture what a student knows, rather than simply whether they are performing at grade level.

What do you believe is the primary purpose of standardized testing?

Standardized testing is best used to measure how each child is performing when compared to peers in the same grade.

Would you support rating schools and teachers based on an average-years-of-academic-growth model, rather than proficiency levels? If not, why?

Measuring results is important and both benchmarks should be considered.

Would you prefer Common Core-aligned adaptive tests over non-adaptive tests? If not, why?

I support the practices favored by educators.

5. Cultivating Labor-Management Collaboration

In order to fulfill the promise of public education, the WTU believes the input of teachers and school employees is critical to the successful implementation of sustainable school reform. The collective bargaining process is the best way to guarantee that educators have a meaningful role in developing and implementing strategies to help students reach high academic standards. This includes the WTU having a meaningful voice in designing and implementing professional development, curricula and evaluation systems.

Specifically, what would change under your leadership to include the WTU in the decision-making process, and how would you include WTU's involvement in the design and implementation of the vision, school budgets, professional development, curricula and evaluation systems in DCPS?

I welcome educators' participation in professional development, vision, and curricula development. I look forward to working with all those who want to help make DC's public schools better.

6. Ending Neighborhood School Closures

In many areas of our city, safe and quality neighborhood and community schools are no longer within easy walking distance for all students. In nearly five years, our communities have witnessed more than 40 school closures, limiting the access to walkable neighborhood schools and suitable feeder schools for students and families. Research is clear: there are no financial benefits to closing schools. In fact, studies demonstrate it actually costs more to close schools.

Under what circumstances would you authorize a traditional public school closure? How would you provide for the students affected by a traditional public school closure?

I would authorize a temporary public school closure if the health and safety of the school community were at risk. Any such closure would require that the school community be accommodated in other District-owned buildings while any repairs or renovations are being made, as happened with Takoma Educational Campus, following a fire.

If you are elected, will you support a moratorium on public school closures for at least five years? Why or why not?

No. It is not practical to make such a five-year promise. At the moment, I cannot imagine he need to close within the next five years.

How will you ensure that there are high-quality, walkable traditional neighborhood public schools accessible to every child in D.C.?

I am not convinced that it is possible to have traditional public schools accessible to every child, but the District is spending a lot of money on public charter schools in most neighborhoods. I support ensuring DC students have access to quality schools.

7. Serving Students with Special Needs

The District has an obligation to provide students with special needs access to educational opportunities that are developmentally and emotionally appropriate. Due to lack of adequate staffing, oversight and targeted funding, students are not receiving their documented instructional (IEP) services — costing us millions in unnecessary lawsuits.

What structures and plans do you have to ensure students with special needs are receiving the services they need to succeed in school?

We are spending far too much to bus our special needs students outside of Washington, DC. I would reorganize the transportation program to encourage more students stay within the District. That would free funds that we could direct back into schools so they can make any necessary accommodations.

8. Holding Charter Schools Accountable

Charter schools and DCPS are not operating on a level playing field. The WTU believes accountability and transparency for charter schools remain major problems in the District of Columbia, resulting in mismanaged funds and misplaced student allocations.

What do you think are the roles of charter schools in D.C.?

The role of charter schools in DC is to educate students.

Do you support requiring charter schools to meet the same requirements as traditional public schools, particularly as they relate to access for all students (i.e., special education)? Why or why not?

Yes. As long as charter schools take public funding, they should be required to take all students.

How will you ensure charter schools meet the same requirements as DCPS teachers? Should charter school teachers have the right to organize and join a union?

Charter school teachers should absolutely have the right to organize and join a union, as should all workers. I will work with the State Superintendant to ensure teachers meet requirements.

As Councilmember, how will you pledge to solve the problem of misplaced and misdirected student allocations due to high student mobility from charter school to the traditional public school?

The annual student surveys should occur twice per academic year. The first in October, and the second in March. Budget can be adjusted accordingly.

9. Improving Early Childhood Education

We know from research that high-quality early childhood education and care programs like Head Start, Early Head Start, child care, preschool programs and full-day kindergarten increase the likelihood that young children, from birth to age five, will have the language and literacy foundation upon which later school success is built. Yet, as reflected in recent audit reports, universal pre-K has not been realized in the District, as too few children in our city—especially impoverished children—have access to quality early childhood programs.

How will you ensure all young learners have access to high-quality early childhood programs with appropriate funding in all parts of the city?

In my oversight capacity as a councilmember I will ensure there is appropriate funding in Ward 4 and the District of Columbia.

10. Implementing Supportive Teacher Development and Evaluation Systems

The best teacher evaluation systems are designed mutually with teacher unions to offer what most teachers are asking for nationwide: a system that supports the continual growth and development of teachers.

Punitive approaches to teacher evaluation systems produce a constant churn of teachers through mutual consent arrangements and cash buyout options. Studies show that students, schools and communities are negatively affected by this lack of stability. Furthermore, a record number of teachers are leaving DCPS, with 126% turnover rate over the last 6 years and only 11% of those based on poor performance.

How would your office work to retain and respect the current population of DCPS teachers?

I will with the schools Chancellor and State Superintendant to ensure that evaluations are conducted in a fair manner.

11. Summary

What are the three things the school district does well that you would continue to support and expand if elected?

- 1. The Wilson High School and Alice Deal Middle School Feeder does an excellent job of educating well over 1,000 students every day. The successful programs should be replicated citywide.**
- 2. The free breakfast program has been a huge boon to students who do not otherwise have access to healthy food to start the day.**
- 3. Washington, DC is an international capital. I would love to see more schools take advantage of the many educational resources in the city.**

What are the top three challenges facing public education in the District of Columbia, and how will you address them if you are elected?

- 1. Special education transportation and funding (I addressed this issue in Question 7.)**
- 2. Low expectations of our students. The combination of low expectations and social promotion often leaves our students ill-equipped to succeed in college or work. I will ensure that internships and summer projects give students a realistic view into what the world expects of them.**
- 3. Childhood obesity. Too many of the District's children suffer from poor diets and inadequate exercise. They cannot learn if health problems get in their way. I will therefore encourage the Department of Parks and Recreation to develop programming that get more children to exercise.**

If we endorse you and support your election, how will you work with us in the future?

Labor always has an open door policy in my office.

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