

**THE DPS CHALKBOARD**  
**SCHOOL BOARD CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE**  
**FEBRUARY 2023**

1. While oversight of the Superintendent is one of your primary roles, past boards have micromanaged our Superintendent, even having them report on every meeting attended, daily schedule, etc. How do you perceive your role of managing the most important employee of District 61?

a. The board must strike a balance between holding the superintendent accountable while at the same time making sure that they have the tools to do their job. Too often, our district has been caught up in “accountability fever” that places the blame of decades of inequities, poor management, and bad board governance at the feet of the current superintendent. This young board must understand that we are in a rebuilding time, and one of the things we need is consistent leadership. This is not to say that the superintendent should receive special treatment or a free pass, but it is to say nothing is perfect, things are rough, and only together will we make it through this.

2. Nearly a third of district funding comes from the state of Illinois - based on the number of students in the district, and with a declining enrollment that revenue will likely be drastically reduced. Another large block of funding comes from the city, which also has a generally declining population. And this is occurring in a time of large inflation where costs continue to increase dramatically. When the CARES money funding cliff arrives in January of 2024, our district, along with many districts around the country, will face major funding issues. While this problem will fall squarely with the Sup and the District CFO, your job as a board member will be to make sure that we are prepared to face this issue and to make sure it's dealt with. Are you prepared to oversee this challenge, and what will you be looking for in future budget proposals?

a. I am concerned that the Decatur Public School district is heading towards a financial cliff for which we are not prepared. The first financial difficulty will arise during my possible tenure on the school board. By the end of 2024, the remaining pandemic relief funds will be fully dispersed. Currently, the board of education is retaining about \$39 million of the remaining \$44 million in ESSER funds to build a new American Dreamer STEM academy. Once these funds are expended, they will be the last of the pandemic aid. As the district did

More importantly, however, is how population loss in Decatur and Macon County will affect the overall health of Macon County's 4th largest employer, the Decatur Public School District. On average, the district shrinks at a rate of approximately 113 students per year. Over the past 20 years, the district has shrunk from 10,300 students in 2003 to 8,147 students in 2022. At the same time, Decatur has lost approximately 14% of its population. Suppose the population and student loss continue at the same rate by 2040. In that case, the city will have a population of about 61,000, with 5,881 students at Decatur Public Schools. This represents a 28% reduction in the student body. If we stay on the same path, the assumption would be that we would need 28% fewer schools, teachers, staff, and administration. And, if past trends continue, our effective property tax rate will continue to rise to mitigate the ill effects of population and home loss.

3. Another huge challenge we have in our district is declining test scores. In many ways solutions to this issue should be reflected in a board member's broad philosophical vision of learning. Which of the following should be funded and/or implemented?

a. We have a generational problem that will take a generation of solutions to remedy. The number one issue facing Decatur Public Schools is our district's overall poor academic performance. The first thing that the board of

education needs to do is to acknowledge that it took us 40-50 years of poor management, a shrinking tax base, and community indifference to reach this low point. The second thing that the board must do is to develop a strategic plan focused on student learning and academic achievement. This plan needs to have realistic timeframes and achievement targets. And everyone on the board will need to understand that this will take much longer than the 4 or 8 years they might serve.

b. Any improvements targeted in the strategic plan must be developed with the input of administration, staff, teachers, and the community. Furthermore, the role that the board will play in revitalizing academic achievement will be that of managing and developing the superintendent of schools. The board must hold the superintendent accountable for the day-to-day operations of the district while at the same time ensuring that the superintendent has the proper tools and staff to implement the board's vision. What we cannot do, is continue to fail thousands of students.

4. We're anxious to hear our Superintendents feelings on cell phones in schools, but one could make an argument that the use of cell phones by students in the classroom (during instruction time) falls under the category of the "purpose" of our school system. At the bare minimum, a board-backed proposal would go a long way in showing the district leadership team that the community is behind a particular course of action. What are your thoughts on cell phone use in the schools and specifically, if it were to come to a vote

a. I do not have enough information on the legality of banning cell phones from schools. Since the proliferation of smartphones over the past 15 years, there have been hundreds of court cases regarding cell phones and their place in school. I understand their detrimental effect in the classroom as I struggle with the issue in the course I teach at Richland. As much as I would like to say that cell phones should

be banned during instruction time, I do not have a good idea of the legality of the matter.

5. Should we allocate more money from the budget (at least while we have CARES money we can use) toward sending staff to job fairs, colleges, etc. to look for qualified teachers?

a. Even with limited CARES funding remaining we need to focus on staff recruiting. Staff recruitment and retention are among the district's most pressing issues. The district started the 2022-2023 school year with 71 open teaching positions. This many openings are highly concerning, even in a national teacher shortage. The school board needs to work with the administration to build a teacher recruitment strategy that recruits teachers from outside our area and builds up homegrown district graduates to become teachers. As we develop our recruiting programs, our district must focus on retaining the teachers and staff they already have. For example, in the State of Illinois, at the district level, the average number of principals at the same school in the past six years is zero. The principal turnover rate at Decatur Public schools is two. Our principals are moving out of their schools twice as fast as the state average.

Regarding teachers, our 3-year average teacher retention rate is 72.9%, while the state average is 87.6%. The board must address retention by Ensuring that students have qualified teachers and school professionals. While providing district staff have the best compensation and working conditions possible. Because "The working conditions of teachers, aides, school professionals, and staff are the learning conditions for students.

6. Many of you have mentioned board “transparency” in your public platforms. What exactly do you mean by that? What actions are you for to provide better transparency?

a. The words accountability and responsiveness would fit my thoughts better than accountability.

In terms of accountability, we start with is that everyone is accountable for their role and contribution to the success of DPS 61. What does that look like?

i. Ensuring that everyone – from the students to the board members and the community – understands their role in making DPS successful.

ii. Ensuring that we hold the Superintendent responsible for the success and support them with the tools they need to succeed.

iii. Ensuring that we, the board, are accountable for the District's financial health and that we spend taxpayers' money responsibly and live within our means.

iv. Ensuring that we, the board, follow the law.

v. Ensuring that the board conducts non-emergency board business only at regularly scheduled board meetings.

b. In terms of responsiveness it beings understanding that as representatives of the community, once elected, we remain in communication - that includes openness and transparency. What does that look like?

i. Ensuring that public participation is welcomed at each meeting, that each participant is treated with

respect, and that we respond to whatever concerns may be voiced.

ii. Building a system that every year after the election the first 18 meetings take place within the school buildings so we can engage the community where they are.

iii. Ensuring that we, as elected officials, are accessible through email, phone calls, and in person to parents and the public

iv. Ensuring that we, as board members, listen and consider the needs and desires of the community when making decisions. We expect that some decisions will not be popular but that we are clear in our rationale.

v. Ensuring I, as a board member, actively engage in my community by participating in public and community events as much as possible.

7. What other concerns do you have that rise to the level of the issues mentioned above and fall squarely into the Board's purview? Please be specific.