

Candidate Responses – Orange County School Board

Darlene Dawson

Question 1: Position Seeking:

DD: School Board District 2

Question 2: Have You Previously Held this Position?

DD: No

Question 3: Will you be attending the August 23, 2023, Orange County Candidate Showcase?

DD: Yes

Question 4: How will you foster relationships between businesses and the school community?

DD: Orange County has such an incredibly supportive business community. We can continue to build on those great relationships by having school spirit nights or fundraisers hosted by local businesses, days of service where students can volunteer for a business owner and learn the ins and outs of making a business successful, increased opportunities for students to tour local businesses and ask questions to begin to understand entrepreneurship, and career days where local business people visit our schools and explain the jobs they do and the education or preparation necessary for that career path.

Question 5: Over the years, minority representation has decreased relative to administration and teaching staff. There is a growing concern among the African American community relative to the issue. What would be your proposal to help bridge the gap?

DD: Ultimately, we need to make Orange County a division that attracts the best talent out there because it's such a great school system. If we make it a top-performing division in the state, minorities and everyone else will want to come here to be a part of it. I do not believe in affirmative action type quotas or manipulating hiring practices just for the sake of meeting a diversity percentage goal. There are qualified people of all races in the field of education and we should hire the best person for the job. I do believe we could increase recruitment efforts in places where minority applicants would be more plentiful - perhaps Human Resources reaching out specifically to Historically Black Colleges or Universities to introduce our county to their education graduates. Prior to college level recruitment, perhaps a teacher-prep program could be implemented whereby high school students can experience teaching, mentoring, and becoming learning "buddies" with our younger grades. American society is full of great black role models - some you've heard of, like George Washington Carver, Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, Ben Carson, and Condoleezza Rice - and some you may not know, like Joseph Hayne Rainey, Hiram Rhodes Revels, and John Rock. These remarkable men and women overcame great hardship to pursue education and rise above their circumstances through their own hard work, innovation, and determination. All of our students should hear from us that we believe in them, that they have the ability and spark inside to pursue their dreams, that those goals are attainable based in large degree on their own work-ethic, commitment, perseverance, and attitude, and that the color of someone's skin should never be the determinant to elevate or subjugate anyone.

Question 6: Our youth are our future. Agricultural education and organizations such as FFA plug students into the pathways available to grow, supply, and create within the agricultural sector. How would you like to see agricultural education be best supported in Orange County Public Schools? Are you in favoring of continuing these programs; what changes, if any, would you like to see? What experience do you have working with said programs?

DD: I never had the opportunity to participate in FFA personally, although my high school housed the agricultural specialty program for our county. Many of my friends enrolled in our high school specifically for FFA, so I have some familiarity even though that was many years ago. This is certainly not my area of expertise, but I appreciate and honor the rich history of agriculture in Orange County, the importance of which cannot be overemphasized. It seems to me that, similar to business partnerships, we could implement some farming partnerships or a collaboration locally with the agriculture program through Virginia Tech. I know that the FFA program at the high school has room to develop into a premier organization with the right tools and people in place. There are levels of character and leadership development as well as agricultural innovation and knowledge available through the FFA program that we have not yet fully activated. We need to offer the staffing, facilities, curriculum, budget, and commitment to let our agricultural programs soar and become the best in the state and even the nation. We live in a county that deserves that honor.

Question 7: Please further explain your interest in a position with our local School Board. What is your connection to Orange County Public Schools?

DD: I am an Orange County grandmother and a retired teacher, having spent 34 years in Virginia's public schools. Education has been my lifetime passion, and even after my retirement, I have continued to teach pro bono because connecting with young people and watching the spark of learning ignite in them is an incredibly fulfilling experience. Teaching is a gift I believe God gave me to use as a blessing to others. I have become increasingly concerned about the direction of public education and feel compelled to do my part to make a difference. Virginia's students experienced the largest learning loss in the nation over the past three years. I have researched the specific data for Orange County from the last 10 years (2012 - 2022). Administrative costs are up 89%, instructional costs are up 42%, per pupil expenditure is up 51%, yet our school division ranking fell from 45th in 2012 to 80th in 2022, out of 131 school divisions. Our achievement scores have all fallen within that same time frame: SOL Reading down 9%, Writing down 21%, History & Social Science down 24%, Mathematics down 14%, and Science down 23%. Meanwhile our student enrollment has remained nearly level at about 5000. It is incumbent upon us to analyze why our students are not achieving and then have the courage to make a course correction. Our students have only one childhood and we have only one opportunity to provide them with the very best educational system we can. All of us have a vested interest in our schools, whether we have children enrolled or not. We are all taxpayers and citizens, neighbors and friends. These students will grow up to become the future moms and dads, employees and employers, civil servants and workforce, for our county, state, and nation. I am a proud Orange County citizen and an educational advocate with the experience and expertise to serve well and faithfully on the school board.

Question 8: What is your stance on CTE education and internship opportunities in the community and how will you support these efforts?

DD: One of my four platform pillars is educational opportunity. CTE is an incredibly important facet of that idea. Students come with many different strengths and skill sets and not all of them are, or should be, college-bound. There are multiple skilled trades desperately in need of qualified applicants. Our public schools should be on the front lines of filling those needs, creating opportunities for students to receive work-release time for credit, apprenticeships, certifications, dual enrollments, on-the-job training, and the chance to walk into a good paying job at graduation rather than taking on unnecessary student loan debt for college classes that they do not need. I would work to see partnerships between our schools and the local skilled trade businesses, as well as local colleges. I know CTE courses are already offered, but I believe there is room to expand and I'd love to see the much talked about CTE facility become a reality. That of course is primarily a budget issue.

Question 9: What do you consider to be the greatest needs of the Orange County Public Schools that the School Board can resolve? If elected, what would be your top priority?

DD: The greatest need is that our children graduate high school having received an actual education. The data is clear that students are not achieving the most basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. These are building blocks for continued success in school and in life. The foundations must be solidly poured in the primary grades so that students have the knowledge to tackle more complex material as they advance. I do not believe we should automatically promote students from grade to grade when they have not yet mastered basic material. It sets them up for continued failure, which then fosters the discipline issues that create classrooms where teachers have to spend their time policing behavior rather than teaching content. This is a no-win for both teachers and students, and one of the primary reasons for our problem with teacher retention at a national level. This failure to achieve can end up in a lifetime of feeling depressed, inferior, unworthy and lead to fewer career opportunities and perhaps even falling into a life of drugs and crime. It is the School Board's duty under VA Code §22.1-79 to oversee and ensure accountability of the schools. The first thing I would like to implement is a full curriculum audit. I want a laser focus on rigorous, traditional academics with phonics-based reading instruction in the primary grades. I'd like to see our younger students spend less time on chromebooks and instead use actual printed textbooks, handwriting that includes cursive, and physical books for reading. If we give them that solid foundation from Pre-K through 2nd grade, then they'll be ready to take wings and soar as they move into the upper grades.
