

2018 School Board Questions (Written) – Casey Ayers

Financial Resources and Budget

1. What are your plans to address the budget deficit in order to fiscally stabilize our schools? What other sources of revenue would you propose instead of relying strictly on the reserves in order to balance the budget?

There are opportunities to trim costs, ranging from reduction of data entry positions through automation, to expanding existing lease and grant programs for infrastructural improvements, allowing each dollar to be better stretched over the usable lifespan of needed equipment and technology. However, no sizable savings can be achieved without recognizing the untenable operating costs associated with the more than \$1 billion in capital assets held by the district, and the imbalance of underutilized schools and those at or above ideal capacity.

While some greater efficiencies can certainly be found in our spending, the last item I'd cut would be supplies and materials. It's vital we provide our teachers with the resources they need to effectively instruct students, whether that take the form of technology that's sufficiently up to date, or simply being certain there's enough paper available in the school supply closet. Too much focus on relatively small dollar items impacts teacher productivity and student learning, with cents saved easily overwhelmed by dollars lost in educational value.

Aside from greatly enhancing the value of our students' diplomas and educational experience, offering industry-recognized certification programs provides one of the exceedingly rare opportunities for us to unlock greater state funding. For each of around 100 such certifications earned by a student, the state will provide a reward of between \$420 and \$840. This helps to make certification programs not just financially sustainable, but a potential source of badly needed income for our schools.

Additionally, I believe it's critical that our schools reach back out to alumni, in the same way higher educational institutions have always done. Activating alumni support can lead to opportunities for philanthropy, to pair students with mentors, and to build constructive relationships with local businesses. This, too, goes hand in hand with a renewed focus on certifications and vocational studies, given the internships, apprenticeships, and other opportunities for hands-on learning working more closely with our business community can yield.

2. In order to better equip our students to enter the work force, do you support expanding our curriculum to include vocational and/or technical training classes? Why or why not? If you support this, how would you propose to implement and finance this expansion?

This is absolutely central to why I'm running. I believe a renewed focus on vocational and technical learning, especially when structured to yield industry-recognized certifications, can lead to brighter futures for all of our students. Americans hold more than \$1.4 trillion in student loans today, and many of those students will never see a sufficient return on that investment.

We can offer all of our students a better way: those on track to continue their studies in college will have stronger resumes that display not merely an interest but a level of proficiency in their field of interest. Those for whom college never seemed like an option will not only be prepared to enter respected fields to earn high incomes right out of school, but will gain the means to continue their education as they see fit over time, without the need to take on the crushing weight of student loans.

Focusing our voc-tech efforts on certification-yielding programs offers students more value, by giving them an employer-recognized credential, proving they have the skills necessary to succeed in a job position. Further, it makes our schools eligible for substantial additional funding from the state. The state provides \$420-\$840 more for most of around 100 such certifications earned per student.

This additional funding makes these programs sustainable to implement, even in the face of our budget challenges, and also better aligns our schools with opportunities to benefit from corporate philanthropy and alumni support. Given the size of the skills gap our businesses face today, many would be delighted to invest in our students, given the objective, knowable outcomes certification programs provide.

3. Would you support having a forensic audit conducted to better determine how the resources are being allocated? Why or why not?

Given the expense in time, funding, and attention a forensic audit would require, I would first want to more closely evaluate our budget to gain a sense of how successful such an audit might be in effectively freeing up funding. That said, I also recognize that an independently conducted audit could help give our community greater confidence that their tax dollars are being spent wisely, and prove central to any case made by the district that additional funding is necessary for our students to succeed.

Personnel/Safety Issues

1. How do you plan to determine the needs and interests of the individual schools in District 2 and effectively advocate those needs and interests to the Duval County School Board?

Meeting with each principal and PTA is the obvious first step, to learn firsthand what's going well in each school, what challenges they face, and in what areas they need more support. We must also recognize that not all students living *in* District 2 attend schools within the district. For example, many high school students within the district attend First Coast or Atlantic Coast, as well as Fletcher. This doesn't even factor in those students attending magnet or career pathway schools. My objective would be to advocate effectively for every student residing in this district – and every student attending Duval County Public Schools – while recognizing the additional advocacy required for those schools located inside the district itself.

2. What are your plans to make our schools safe without creating a “prison-like” atmosphere?

Every action we take must first take the student experience into account. Our children have a right to grow, learn, and play while being kept safe. In order to strike this balance, as many of our safety initiatives as possible should be nearly invisible to students. Strengthening classroom doors can provide substantial benefit, no different than how strengthening cockpit doors improved airliner security more than any other single action. Installing gunshot detector systems that can automatically lock down classrooms – while maintaining quick egress if needed – is another way to help secure our students in a way that doesn't impact their daily school experience. I also believe that we must have a sworn law

enforcement officer to serve as a resource on every school campus, and that the school safety assistant program is insufficient.

We need to recognize that some schools were not designed with a safety-centric mentality, with wide open campuses, and many continue to utilize unsafe portable classrooms. Investments will be necessary to solve these challenges, but present an opportunity to better serve our students at the same time.

Finally, we must also recognize that the nightmare events we understandably focus on are not the safety issue our schools really face on a daily basis: far more common are instances of violence, bullying, and drugs infiltrating our schools. Solving these challenges is not a matter of infrastructure, but of providing adequate support services and empowering administrative staff with clear policies and sufficient discretion.

3. What changes at the policy level, if any, would you propose to address chronic absenteeism and other discipline-related issues?

Our schools should be places every student looks at as a place of opportunity. Renewing our commitment to vocational and technical learning not only serves to make our curriculum more relevant to all of our students, but also will inspire those most likely to drop out, present disciplinary issues, or simply choose not to come to school on a regular basis. If a student is led to believe that college is the only pathway to success, and also believes that college is an impossible dream, their motivation to attend and perform well will be low. We need to help our students see that the actions they take today impact the options they have tomorrow, and that opportunity exists for each of them.

Governance/Communication

1. Describe your plans for improving communications with the State Board of Education and the Duval County delegation.

We must regularly invite the delegation into our schools, to see the good work being done, and coordinate with them to understand and influence the state's educational priorities. This relationship has too often ranged from standoffish to hostile, and that's not in the best interest of our students. We all want the best for our students, and by working together, we can arrive at a better path forward to serve them best.

2. How do you propose to keep your constituents informed on a regular basis with regard to pertinent matters related to District 2?

Community meetings like the one you so graciously invited me to recently are critical, because of the invaluable opportunity to meet face to face. However, we must realize that many parents wish to be equally engaged in their students' futures, but are prevented from doing so: there may be small children at home in need of a parent, they may work jobs with non-standard hours that make evening meetings impossible, or they may lack reliable transportation to attend events. It's critical that every constituent have the opportunity to engage. Social media tools allow for a more rapid, direct, and equitable line to our elected officials than anything we've ever seen. I'd look to leverage these to meet constituents

where they are, keeping them aware and engaged on a continuing basis, without incurring any substantial taxpayer expense.

3. What is your position on maintaining local control over the evaluation and renewal of charter schools?

I believe that the state reaching past our school board in the administration of charter schools is no different than if they were to reach past other local governing authorities to approve new development at the Neptune Beach K-Mart site: it's a violation of home rule, an usurpation of the voters' will, and dilutes the ability for voters within the district to have a direct impact on their students' futures. I will work vigorously to protect the oversight authority held by our school board, and to ensure that it is applied to all of our schools to ensure better outcomes for our students.

Stormwater Fees

1. The Duval County School Board recently stopped paying stormwater utility fees in all three beach cities, claiming that the fees are actually assessments and that the beach cities have no power to sue for collection because of sovereign immunity. The school properties continue to receive stormwater service despite non-payment for the past several months. Over the years, all three city governments have provided support and materials to the schools within their jurisdictions in the form of crosswalk signage and markings, police supported traffic control and safety plans, landscaping and tree service, post-storm recovery, educational and career support, and other similar services that assist the schools with their daily operations. How would you propose to bring this problem to a solution that can work for all sides and ensure the cooperative relationship between the schools and the beach cities continues to benefit our teachers and children? How does this decision affect the inter-local agreement, if any, with regard to the school board's authority to stop paying stormwater fees?

There's no question that it's critical our schools coordinate closely with other community governing authorities. As mentioned in the question, there are innumerable services our local governments provide to our schools, without which our schools would be unable to effectively serve our students. I would wish to learn what led to the change in perception that resulted in stoppage of fee payments in order to better assess the particular details of this issue. We should all be working toward the same goals for our community, and anything impeding progress in that regard must be addressed.