

Questions for Portland City School Committee Candidates

Your name: **Jaimey Caron**

Your home address: **19 Old Barn Lane**

Your email address: **jrcaron@maine.rr.com**

Your phone number: **878-0942**

Your website: **caronforschools.org**

Other blog/social media sites you use: **none**

If elected, what will your top three priorities be? **Develop a comprehensive plan for the district, upgrade our elementary facilities and strengthen our financial planning**

Do you have children and where did/do they attend school? [This question has no bearing on your endorsement—we merely want to have some idea of your background.] **I have two sons in the Portland system. Tyler is a 7th grader at Lyman Moore Middle School and Kyle is a 5th grader at Lyseth.**

Please share one positive change you have seen in our schools *and* in the School Committee over the last year? **There have been many changes in the district during my three years on the School Committee – we’ve fully recovered from the 2007 financial disaster, we’re reorganizing our central office structure with an eye towards equity, consistency, accountability and transparency and we’ve re-focused the School Committees on the important issues affecting the district. In short, I think we’ve successfully repositioned the district to be proactive rather than reactive to the changing world around us.**

Please share one frustrating change you have seen in our schools *and* in the School Committee over the last year? **The most frustrating change has been the worsening economy and how it has affected our ability to fund educational services. While the economic climate has forced us to prioritize what we do and to make tough choices (that’s a good thing), it followed a financial catastrophe of our own making. The combined effect has placed an incredible strain on the district that has affected both our students and staff.**

What competing responsibilities do you have, both professionally and personally, and how will you juggle those responsibilities? **As a father, spending quality time with my family has been the most difficult responsibility to balance. I’ve tried to use my service on the School Committee to teach my sons about community service and commitment. My family has been very supportive and we’ve adjusted to the workload. As an engineer, I’ve tried to tie my professional responsibilities to my service on the School Committee through my work on our facilities issues. I am lucky to work for a supportive company that values my community service.**

What is your position on the elected mayor proposal? How do you see this changing (if at all) the relationship between the school committee and the city council? **During my 9 years on the Planning Board and my 3 years on the School Committee, I’ve been troubled by the increasingly fractured manner in which we make decisions. Whether it’s the product of the times we live in or the structure of our local government, the city lacks a clear vision of what we want to be and where we want to go. Every issue boils down to one neighborhood or interest group versus another with no way of resolving the inherent conflict. We focus on**

the small details where consensus can be found because the big issues are too difficult to solve in a way that does not offend.

No matter what the structure of our local government is, the school district will be affected – we’re all in this together – so any change in the way we govern ourselves will no doubt affect the relationship between the school committee and the city council. Likewise, no matter what the structure of our local government is, we need quality people to serve. It’s clear that in its current form, our local government isn’t working for a large cross section of our community. If an elected mayor gets us to a place where responsible people will come together to make decisions that are in the best interest of the city and then see them through, it’s worth trying.

What do you think the role of School Committee should be in determining the school budget? What ways will you improve the process of school budgeting? **The School Committee has the responsibility to ensure that every child who lives in the city has access to a quality public education. We do that by working with the staff and our community to come up with the right balance of programs and services that ultimately defines Portland’s educational goals and priorities. An important part of that process is to understand the cost. As an elected body, the School Committee serves an important role as the bridge between those providing the service (staff), those paying for the service (citizens) and those benefiting from the service (parents and students). The most important thing we do as a School Committee is to ensure that everyone has a clear understanding of what is going on in our schools and how we intend to invest the resources provided to us for that purpose.**

In our current system, there are three distinct phases to our budget approval process. The School Committee starts the process by preparing a budget that best meets the city’s educational needs. The City Council then has the responsibility to place our educational needs in context with all of the other services our citizens have come to expect from local government and decides the appropriate financial burden to place upon the taxpayers. Lastly, the voters of Portland have the final say in approving a school budget that hopefully strikes the right balance between the educational and non-educational needs of the city in a fiscally responsible manner.

In my opinion, the most important roles played by the School Committee in the budget process are clear planning and communication. The School Committee recently committed itself to multiyear budgeting and comprehensive planning. The result of those efforts should be a clearly stated vision of what our schools should be, what it will take to get there and how to pay for it.

With the current reality of the state and city’s school budgets, more cuts seem likely. What will you cut and why? What will you fight for to keep it from being cut? **It is true that funding at the federal and state level has significantly declined over the last couple of budget cycles and will continue into the near future. The district has responded by looking more critically at the way we deliver services and prioritizing the types of programs and services we offer. As a result, we’ve been able to preserve (athletics, music, co-curricular), and in some cases expand (technology, elementary World Languages) important services necessary not only to prepare our students for life after graduation but also to remain competitive with neighboring communities to retain and attract families to live in Portland.**

I believe we need to continue to work on a system wide approach to service delivery in order to improve efficiency (food service, curriculum, scheduling) and equity (facilities, staffing), look for opportunities to work more closely with our community to raise revenues and compete for grants based on our demographic profile (athletics and co-curricular) and create financial structures that will help us deal with future economic downturns (multiyear budget, dedicated fund balances). Our short term goal should be to maintain what we currently offer and position ourselves for growth when the economy recovers (comprehensive planning).

While cutting programs and services is a seductive choice in hard economic times, the long term impact and stigma associated with a substandard educational system as compared to neighboring communities is a real threat to Portland whose impact will be felt by both residents (with or without kids in the system) and businesses for decades. I would hate to see Portland become the declining urban center of an otherwise thriving southern Maine.

How do we increase the number of graduates that go on to pursue post-secondary education? What benchmarks would inform Portland schools towards reaching these goals? **The key is making school relevant to students. Because we have 4 high schools in Portland, we have the ability to create a diverse range of program offering that is responsive to student needs. With the support and encouragement of the School Committee, the new superintendent has already begun the task of updating our high school curriculum, technology and scheduling. Integrating our high schools with our diverse business and arts community can make the high school experience more relevant to our students' post graduate plans.**

By focusing on relevancy, we are now thinking of ways to bring educational opportunities to the student instead of expecting the student to come to us. Portland High School recently made strides in improving the drop out rate and meeting federal standards for Adequate Yearly Progress by aggressively reaching out to students. Our high school principals have been exploring new ways to assess our performance beyond the traditional accreditation process. The new high school schedule will provide more choices to students and preserve low enrollment courses, especially advanced placement courses, making it easier for students to pursue their goals. And providing laptops to our students means that we can provide instruction using methods that they are not only very familiar and comfortable with but are consistent with the world they'll encounter once they graduate.

How can we better include our city's immigrant population in school decisions? What do you think of legal resident voting? **Approximately 25% of Portland's students are English Language Learners (ELL) so their input is vital to making Portland's schools successful. Our immigrants come from every corner of the world, including some of the most dysfunctional societies. The cultural change can be intimidating and overwhelming making it easy for those students and families to get lost in the system. In my view, the biggest challenge is to make these students and families "visible" and to make sure that there is staff in place to advocate for their needs. To that end, this year the School Committee added a number of new positions in the Multicultural Center to address our growing need.**

The School Committee did not stop with just adding staff. Last year the district updated our Lau Plan which details how we identify ELL students and get them the support they need. The district is also placing greater emphasis on professional development for the staff at all levels to ensure that the plan is implemented successfully. Our Multicultural Center is one of the best run departments in the district but Portland's strong site based management

culture sometimes disrupts a consistent and equitable distribution of resources and support. The new superintendent has taken steps to remove management and organizational obstacles that interfere with the efficient delivery of ELL support services.

At the School Committee level, we created a new Appointments Subcommittee as a direct result of several workshops with the NAACP last year. The intent going forward is to create a system of advisory boards and citizen panels that can assist the School Committee in addressing specific issues. The School Committee recognizes it is important to provide a formal structure to identify and address important issues such as those of our immigrant population. I believe such a structure would benefit other important issues such as bullying and the use of technology in the classroom.

With respect to voting rights, it is the cornerstone of our democratic process and an important element of what it means to be a citizen of the United States. Casting an informed ballot is the most important thing a citizen can do. The ability to become a legal resident in and of itself does not provide sufficient evidence that an individual understands our unique and complicated form of government and is therefore prepared to exercise the right to vote responsibly. To me, the path to citizenship in part requires such a demonstration and should be the minimum standard for voting at any level of government.

Do you think student transportation needs any changes? Why or why not? The district has seen changes in student transportation in the last couple of years and I believe more will come. Part of the change has been in response to the cost of providing the service such as upgrading the bus fleet, partnering with South Portland for maintenance of the fleet, and buying vans to transport students instead of paying for taxi services. Based on our experience with South Portland, the district has also explored other regional transportation opportunities with our neighbors and the state.

The other part has to do with changes in the way we deliver educational services. With the opening of the Ocean Avenue school and the impact of overcrowding in some of our other elementary schools, I believe the district will take a closer look at transportation for elementary students with an eye towards equity, including the availability of safe walking routes for our youngest students. And with the new common high school schedule, convenient transportation for students between sites coupled with the use of technology is a key component of improving the quality and availability of our high school programming.

Data shows enrollment is declining in some Portland schools. Why do you think this is? What, if anything, should be done about it? Our school enrollments have shown a slight growth in the number of students attending Portland elementary schools and a slight decline in the middle and high schools. Unlike the state in general, our relatively flat enrollment has helped to soften the impact of reduced state funding as allocated through the state funding formula. This year and last year, the district had to respond to increased enrollment at the elementary level by adding staff. Some of the increase is due to immigrant students moving to Portland but others have suggested that the economy has played a role in limiting access to private education.

Regardless, increased enrollment is a good thing for Portland and should be a priority. A competitive school system that can show real results is the key to attracting families to live in Portland. Because we are unique in the state with our combination of diversity, amenities,

business and culture, the job of attracting people to Portland is half complete. If we build a good educational system, students will come.