

Questions for Portland City School Committee Candidates

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If elected, what will your top three priorities be? **As a candidate for the seat representing District Three on the Portland School Committee, I'm not running to shake things up. I believe the Portland School Committee has been doing a good job during the last couple of years and that Peter Eglinton has done well representing the people of District Three in that capacity. They have done quite a bit to restore a sense of fiscal responsibility and public confidence, which had ebbed to an alarmingly low level. If I am elected, I would continue that work and dedicate myself to preserving efficiency, excellence and accountability in Portland schools.**

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 three children: Kate, age 6; Vivian, age 3; and Daniel, age 1. Kate attends Longfellow Elementary, where she will enter the first grade in September. Vivian will enter Kindergarten at Longfellow in September 2012, before my first term is completed, should I be elected in November, and we expect Daniel to enter Longfellow as well in September 2014.**

Please share one positive change you have seen in our schools *and* in the School Committee over the last year? **The Portland School Committee has made great strides in restoring public confidence in the body. Under Superintendent James Morse, the district created a surplus this year for the first time in three years. In the schools themselves, foreign language instruction was added back into the elementary curriculum.**

Please share one frustrating change you have seen in our schools *and* in the School Committee over the last year? **As a parent, the ongoing inadequacy of basic school supplies, such as paper, glue sticks, and other materials, is a source of great frustration. To see this shortage supported by the members of the Portland School Committee (see Portland Press Herald story, "Portland's Principals Tightening Their Belts, August 17, 2010) was also disappointing.**

What competing responsibilities do you have, both professionally and personally, and how will you juggle those responsibilities? **As a self-employed communications consultant, I work hard to provide the highest level of service to my roster of clients, who depend on me to develop and implement innovative communications strategies that will help them meet their internal and external organizational goals. As a husband and father of three, I know firsthand the challenges of providing for and raising a family in difficult economic times. These are serious commitments – and so is a position on the School Committee. The nature of this commitment is something I gave serious consideration before deciding to run for the position. As a parent and a professional, I have developed strong time management skills; without them, I would have failed long ago. Moreover, I am lucky to have as a partner a spouse who understands and supports my choices. In that context, I am confident that I will be able to handle the responsibility that goes with representing District Three on the Portland School Committee.**

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? **I fully support the notion of a strong mayor; if anything, I believe the measure on the November ballot does not go far enough in establishing a strong mayor. That said, the elected mayor proposal does provide the city with a means of increasing accountability. The elected mayor would have veto power over the budget, and that is a powerful tool when it comes to controlling spending, so in that sense, it represents a good start. With respect to the language of the charter proposals pertaining to the relationship between the City Council and the School Committee, its passage would codify practices that have, in large part, already been put into place by the current elected officials, i.e., regular communication and a dedication to sound fiscal management.**

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 duties of the Portland School Committee, and school committees in general, are clearly spelled out in state law. They include the setting of policy, school management, superintendent selection and oversight, the development of curriculum and districting, in addition to responsibilities relating to discipline and the development and implementation of codes of conduct and safety. With respect to the budget, the members of the Portland School Committee must work with the members of the City Council and city staff to develop a budget that responds to the needs of the city's students within the constraints imposed by funding levels – a budget that is ultimately approved by the City Council and the voters. Should I be elected in November, I would maintain strong channels of communication with all stakeholders to develop a budget that emphasizes efficiency, excellence and accountability in schools, a budget that keeps the maximum amount of resources possible focused on classrooms, where they will directly benefit the students who attend our schools.**

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? **The budget itself is somewhat of a moving target; as of this writing, enrollment numbers are preliminary and the amount of money that the city will get from the state is not yet set. That said, it's clear that we will face a reduction in funding, perhaps on the order of \$4 million. With respect to cuts, without the benefit of accurate information, analysis and input from other stakeholders who have a voice in the decision as well, it is difficult to point to specific line items that should be cut. Nonetheless, the superintendent has stated that he believes the current climate will almost certainly necessitate some staff cuts. Where, and if, these cuts will be made will be a point of discussion. As a member of the school committee, my priority would be to preserve excellence, accountability and efficiency in our schools by keeping resources focused on the classrooms, where they will benefit students most directly.**

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? **Preparing students for post-secondary education is one of the primary missions of Portland schools and the district has done solid work in this area. The short answer: acknowledge the relationship that exists between access to pre-school and lifelong learning, provide all students equal access to the best possible facilities and technology and develop a curriculum that adequately prepares students for the rigors of post-secondary education. Success or failure in this area would be informed by several specific benchmarks, including the graduation rate, the number of students who apply to post-secondary institutions, the number of students accepted to post-secondary institutions and the number of students who graduate from post-secondary institutions.**

How can we better include our city's immigrant population in school decisions? What do you think of legal resident voting? **I oppose non-citizen voting. I firmly believe the vote is a privilege that should be reserved solely for citizens. Proponents of non-citizen voting point out that legal residents who are not citizens pay taxes yet do not get a voice in decisions that are made with respect to how these tax dollars are spent. This may well be true, but the same could be said of other populations as well – for example, Portland's students. Many students under the age of 18 work and have taxes, including SSI deductions, taken out of their paychecks. Yet these students are also denied the vote. If, as proponents say, that the path to citizenship is long and arduous, then let's have a discussion about how – and if – that should be changed. But awarding non-citizens the right to vote, even in a limited capacity, is not something I can get behind in any capacity.**

Do you think student transportation needs any changes? Why or why not? **In the course of gathering signatures for my nomination and in my campaign subsequent to being certified as a candidate for the District Three seat on the School Committee, I have knocked on literally hundreds of doors across the district and talked with many voters about our schools and the challenges that face the district in the current economic climate. Not once has the notion of student transportation come up as something that needs to be changed in some respect; indeed, in my experience as a parent of a child who rides the school bus to Longfellow Elementary and in conversations with the parents of other children who ride the bus, no one has ever given voice to the thought that student transportation needs to be changed. My thinking is, if it's not broken, don't fix it. That said, though, perhaps there is more we can do system-wide to improve walkability and reduce our need for petroleum and the costs associated with that need.**

Data shows enrollment is declining in some Portland schools. Why do you think this is? What, if anything, should be done about it? **In the larger picture, demographic trends in our country point to fewer children. This would naturally translate within our city as declining enrollment in Portland schools. If enrollment statistics bear this out, our challenge will be to adapt our system to a smaller student body without sacrificing the ability to accommodate larger numbers in the future. Recent media reports indicate that declining enrollment may, in fact, be "bottoming out." A recent MPBN story quoted Maine's Acting Education Commissioner Angela Flaherty noting that school districts in Maine will see slow enrollment growth over the coming decade. In this context, then, our challenge seems to be coping with dwindling resources on a long-term basis.**