

**Orange County Board of Education
Candidate Questionnaire
Sponsored by Orange County Voice**

Personal Profile

Name: Donna Coffey

Position Sought: Orange County School Board

Incumbent (y/n): N

Education/Professional Background:

- *Education: AAS, Accounting from Alamance Community College; Attended North Carolina Central University for 2 years*

- *Occupation: Retired from Orange County Local Government in October 2009 after serving almost 30 years in a number of financial and budget related positions; most recent appointment was Budget Director for the County, a position held for more than 12 years*

Questions

1. What skills/training do you bring to the table that can benefit Orange County students? If you have served on the board previously, why do you want to serve again?

The opportunity to serve on the Board of Education allows me to make the most of my life experiences, sound judgement, and professional knowledge.

One of my most prominent assets is I understand school finance and budget issues. I recently had the opportunity to retire from Orange County Local Government after almost thirty years of public service. During my tenure, I served in a number of finance and budget-related positions with my most recent appointment being Budget Director – a position I held for more than twelve years. In that capacity, I oversaw the multi-million dollar day-to-day operating budget and ten-year Capital Investment Plan for the County. Since about fifty percent of the County's resources are dedicated to funding local school districts, I gained much insight into school finances, policies and needs. In addition, I was staff advisor to a number of Commissioner-appointed committees related to school operational and capital needs and funding. I have also served on, and learned much from, several state committees dedicated to public education and local taxation and finance.

My local government budgeting experience will allow me to help ensure funding priorities

are properly identified and used to build the best system possible in an environment of reduced resources.

I have not previously served on the School Board or any other political office.

2. In your view, what is the primary responsibility of the School Board and what should its goals be?

In my opinion, the two most important responsibilities of the Board are:

- Guide the direction of the district by setting policies and goals that adhere to state, federal and local laws and community values
- Hire and evaluate the superintendent and ensure the district is managed well by professionals

The role of the School Board is often misunderstood by the public and sometimes by board members themselves. I believe it is important to emphasize that it is not the Board's responsibility to become involved in school administration or make administrative decisions. The superintendent is the chief administrator; the board has no administrative function.

The Board's goals should reflect an understanding of the community as a whole and respect its diverse cultures. An effective board is one that is committed to providing the best possible public education for all students, families and the community as a whole. They also do not allow personal feelings towards others to affect their judgement nor do they represent interests of special groups of individuals.

3. What three programs that directly affect student achievement are working best in Orange County Schools? What programs need the most improvement? How would you improve them?

I believe it is clear that measures enacted over the last few years (community learning centers, benchmarking, increased technology in the classroom, early intervention, etc.) have affected student achievement since analysis shows not only is the achievement gap narrowing, students at all levels are performing better. In addition, more than 81% of our seniors successfully completed high school – placing Orange County almost 10% above the state average.

While this news is positive, it is clear there is more work to do. In order for this trend to continue, the District must not only expand programs already in place, such as parental involvement, community learning centers and free middle school afterschool programs, it must also focus on intense early intervention along with recruitment and retention of more diverse teaching staff, and alternative learning opportunities and environments.

For me, one of the priorities would be offering alternative learning opportunities for students. In particular, I would like the district to explore learning centers for students on short-term suspension and non-traditional learning opportunities for students who are employed.

4. How would you prioritize areas of spending for the Orange County School budget? If funding was cut, where would you cut spending?

In my opinion, the district should dedicate the bulk of its resources to the classroom and to technology to ensure each student has the opportunity to succeed. Funding reductions would need to occur in areas where it would have the least impact on students. One of the first steps would be to look at all programs and services to determine which ones are core (mandated) and which ones are discretionary. Clearly, the district would not be able to reduce mandated services, but there may be some flexibility in funding discretionary, or non-mandated, programs and services. Another area to analyze would be capital expenditures – to determine if there are particular non-critical projects that could potentially be postponed for a year or two.

5. Do you feel that the amount of parental involvement allowed or encouraged with teachers and coaches is more than enough, less than enough or about right? Why?

From my personal experience, I have found, for the most part, all school personnel welcome parental involvement whether it is in the form of a phone call, email or personal visit. I realize “free” or non-classroom time is limited, and sometimes it may take a little longer than I expected for them to get back with me, but all-in-all, I have had good experiences.

6. The legislature recently decided to add age-appropriate sex education for the public school in addition to abstinence only programs. Do you support this? Why/why not?

The “Healthy Youth Act of 2009” requires school districts to offer a comprehensive, age-appropriate, fact-based, scientific sex education curriculum that includes Federal Drug Administration approved information about ways to prevent pregnancy, including abstinence, transmission and prevention of sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual abuse and assault. It is also important to note that parents have the option to remove their child from the program if they choose to do so.

I believe the more informed children are, like adults, the better choices they will make. I believe, in addition to the curriculum offered by our schools, sex education also involves teaching children personal values in the home, in faith communities, and in our society as a whole.

7. Is bullying a problem at OCS? If yes, what would you do to improve this?

I believe bullying exists in Orange County Schools. In addition to physical and mental bullying, I believe cyber-bullying is becoming more of a problem as social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace becomes more popular. In December 2009, the Board of Education adopted policies prohibiting discrimination, harassment and bullying. Since the policies were adopted fairly recently, I do not think they should be updated this soon. I do believe, however, the Board should receive periodic staff reports on bullying in the schools to determine the effectiveness of the recently enacted policies. As additional information becomes available, the Board may, or may not, see a need to possibly amend the policy.

8. The school bus system is important to rural residents who lack neighborhood schools. Some of our children are on the bus for more than one hour to get to school. We are also concerned about their safety on the bus

a. What is a reasonable amount of time for students to be on the school bus before the first school bell rings?

- i. **Elementary Student?** no more than 1 ¼ hours
- ii. **Middle School Student?** no more than 1 ¼ hours
- iii. **High School Student?** no more than 1 ¼ hours

b. Should new school buses have seat belts? Why/why not?

The State of North Carolina does not require school buses to have seat belts installed. I have read statistics on both sides of the issue. For example, according to the School Bus Information Clearinghouse:

“Modern school buses (those manufactured after April 1, 1977) are equipped with more safety equipment than any other vehicle on the road. This is by design because safety regulators and state pupil transportation officials always err on the side of providing an extra margin of safety. The size of the school bus alone gives it an important advantage in all but the most catastrophic circumstances. Key federal safety requirements include:

- *Special passenger crash protection: Well-padded, high-back, energy-absorbing seats, as well as special requirements for wheelchair restraint systems. These seating systems provide “automatic protection” for young passengers. Additionally, school bus interiors are designed to reduce the chances of injury caused by sharp edges or body panels that may tear loose in a crash.”*

Statistics from the National Transportation Safety Board indicate that, nationwide, an average of 11 passengers per year (since 1984) have died in school bus crashes.

On the other hand, there are a number of studies that encourage the use of seat belts on school buses.

All these things said, I would need much more analytical information before forming an opinion one way or the other.

9. Legal, moral and ethical issues are a fact of life and provide important teaching moments for our students. Is the current code of conduct working? What is the board's role in assuring that legal/ethical issues involving faculty, staff or board members are handled fairly and expeditiously, with minimal distraction?

As leaders in our community, Board members of all elected offices serve as role models and are expected to comply with state statutes and ethics. With that said, it is important to note confidential personnel matters are allowed by statute and are to be discussed "in closed session" until such time it is legally allowable for the information to become public.