

# Orange County Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire

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### Personal Profile

**Name:** Keith Cook  
**Position Sought:** *Orange County School Board*  
**Incumbent (y/n):** No  
**Education:** Completed Coursework in Business/Finance at Fayetteville State in Fayetteville, NC  
**Professional Background:** Retired Financial Consultant, Certified Estate Planner, and Senior Advisor

### 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?**

**Response:** My skills/training as a former school board member of 10 years for Orange County Schools; my eight years as former chair of the Orange County Middle Schools Afterschool Program for Orange County Schools and Chapel Hill Carrboro City Schools; my three years as the current co-chair of a non-profit educational organization called the Northern Orange Education Task Force (NOETF) which also includes opening the first church-based community learning centers; and my involvement on various district committees that focus on closing the achievement gap and reducing the dropout and suspension rates all demonstrate my strong background and experience in serving our youth in different capacities as well as my continued dedication and commitment to educational excellence for ALL children. These experiences are why I want to be actively involved once again in helping the Orange County School Board direct the future path of the district in all areas that impact teaching and learning.

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

**Response:** The role of school boards has changed over time as the structure of public education has changed. I believe the responsibilities of the school board are to hire the superintendent, set policy, give direction, provide a vision for the district, respond to local concerns, and make budget decisions. The primary goals are ensuring high student achievement in safe, nurturing school environments and

providing fiscal accountability and transparency. The school board should also engage in ongoing evaluation of the superintendent and administration as well as self evaluation, and of course, attend board training and professional development. Lastly, I believe that one of the most important task of a school board is to “set the tone” for the district’s priorities and to promote communication within and outside the school district.

**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?**

**Response:** Based on presentations recently heard at school board meetings, the three programs that seem to be working to improve student achievement include district literacy efforts, professional learning communities, and schools having data driven goals and strategies that focus on student growth in math, reading, and writing.

There is always room for improvement in every program area. But as of this moment, I don’t have any evidence or knowledge to responsibly say right now what programs need the most improvement or how I would improve them. If I’m elected I expect to spend time assessing which programs are working to improve student achievement and which ones are not. Improving them will be based on that feedback, input from others regarding their thoughts, what research says is best to support teaching and learning, and what can be realistically done fiscally and programmatic to make any possible changes.

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

**Response:** Prioritizing spending areas would be based on feedback first from the expected state and county appropriation; from schools regarding their needs for supporting teaching and learning; from the district Superintendent regarding their efforts to support teaching and learning and any capital improvements; and from a board review of all these spending needs that will be prioritized based on programmatic, health and safety, and capital improvement mandates, and the expected county appropriations. Though it all at all levels there is parent input.

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?

**Response:** I don't think anyone can dictate to parents how much involvement they should have with any school personnel if the parent's contact is about their own child's needs regardless of what those needs might be. Staying involved with a child's schooling is a parent's right and responsibility and that is why schools should find creative ways to encourage parent involvement from kindergarten through high school in and out of the classroom. I also think both parents and schools can always do more as partners to support students academically and otherwise. With that said, there should also be clear protocols to make sure that the interactions are appropriate and constructive.

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?

**Response:** I support the Healthy Youth Act 2009 for students in grades 7 through 9 because students will continue to learn about abstinence until marriage within the context of a comprehensive sexuality program. My understanding is that any information presented to students about reproductive health and safety related topics will be accurate, research-based, and give parents the right to review all materials and withdraw their child from the program if they feel uncomfortable having someone else teach their child about this topic.

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

**Response:** I think all school districts, including OCS, have situations that might involve a student at one point or another being bullied or harassed by other students until the victim hates coming to school to learn. In 2004 as a former board member I served on a committee to draft the district's first anti-bullying policy, which was approved in May 2004 in response to a serious bullying matter. As a potential school board member, I would expect our school leaders to prevent bullying among students and its employees by complying with all requirements of the new School Violence Prevention Act. As a potential school board member, my job will be to monitor how the district is complying with this new law, to ensure students, parents and staff that the bullying and harassment policy will be enforced, and that the district will have a plan to promote school environments that are bully and

harassment free, including strategies to address any concerns. I would also encourage more mediation, especially peer mediation at the middle and high school levels.

**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? Response: Unknown to me**
- ii. Middle School Student? Response: Unknown to me**
- iii. High School Student? Response: Unknown to me**

**I don't know what is reasonable for a mostly rural community when you look at how far some Northern Orange communities are from the nearest schools that students in those communities should attend. I would want to do more research on best practices in a rural community but ideally I would like to think students should not be on a bus more much more than an hour.**

**There is something that can be done if the district can collaborate with parents about their concerns and address them the best they can about, why and what would it take to allow their child to ride on the school buses provided for them. I have heard a concern myself from parents, not wanting to leave their child either at home along or outside with no protection in the mornings. If those issues could be solved and parents allowed more of their children to ride the bus back and forth to school the school district would be authorized additional buses for the increased riders, there by lessening the distance the buses would have to travel to provide service for bus riding students and hopefully quicker.**

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

**Response: I believe that all of the newer buses that students ride should have seat belts on them for safety reasons, especially for the younger students. I do not believe the district should budget money to install seat belts on any of our older buses.**

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?**

**Response:** In terms of the current code of conduct, if the district is complying with its board approved policy of rules and expectations and the board ensures compliance; if administrators are applying rules and expectations for all students who violate any part of the code of conduct in a consistent and fair manner; and if the code of conduct is communicated regularly to all those who are impacted by this board policy, including how to appeal, so that everyone understands what is expected, then the current code of conduct is working. If applying the code of conduct is not being handled in the ways I just mentioned then the board needs to re-examine why and then come up with a plan to address the problem areas.

The board's role in handling legal/ethical issues is to hear the facts from the appropriate parties; get advice from the board attorney about the best way to handle any issue involving faculty, staff or board member fairly and quickly with minimal distraction; discuss how to move forward following attorney input; and then reach board consensus on the plan to address the legal/ethical issue. Once there is board consensus, then if appropriate, the superintendent and human resources should handle the matter involving staff. Regarding the board member, the same process should be used except the board member in question should be removed from any board discussion once the facts have been reviewed by the attorney.