

Columbus City School District Board of Education Election November 7, 2017

To comment on candidates' responses, go to <https://capeohio.org/our-blog/>

Citizen Advocates for Public Education (CAPE Ohio) recognize that actions and decisions by members of the Columbus Board of Education impact greatly the education, development, and lives of thousands of children and the communities in which they will live and work.

The Board's actions also affect the future of our system of public education that has anchored for generations America's democracy by providing broad and generous opportunities for all citizens.

CAPE Ohio invited the candidates for Columbus City School Board to send written responses to a set of five questions. Our intent was not to endorse, but to learn of each candidate's views and plans for improving the quality of education for all children and for strengthening teaching, advising and supporting students and to post responses to the CAPE Ohio website.

As of October 4, 2017, five of the six candidates submitted their responses and met with CAPE Ohio members to discuss further the issues identified in the questions.

CAPE Ohio asked candidates to respond to the following questions:

1. What measures will you propose to reduce the pressures on teachers caused by the mandated high stakes testing?
2. Will you fight against the city's giving tax breaks to developments when such actions reduce tax support for our City's Schools?
3. What policies and practices will you seek to allow teachers to have more freedom and flexibility in how and what they teach?
4. Do you support parents being able to "opt out" their children from high stakes tests?
5. What should be the district's strategies for retaining students whose families have pursued or are interested in charter school enrollment?

Note: All responses from candidates are reproduced exactly as submitted with the exception of font and format changes.

Responses from Candidates

Question 1. What measures will you propose to reduce the pressures on teachers caused by the mandated high stakes testing?

Michael Cole

According to the Great Lakes Center for Research & Practice, “high stakes testing,” is a term defined as, achievement tests that have specific, serious, consequences attached to their results. The Board and District leadership at Columbus City Schools (CCS) have instituted several measures to assist educators of our children in preparation for high stakes tests such as the Third Grade Reading Guarantee.

We have instituted a “Records Day,” for teachers to provide them extra time to prepare and compile student data. Other reductive measures entail, administrative support through community engagement activities that are door-to-door campaigns, Literacy Weekend events, and Books on the Bus through our classified employee bus drivers.

What’s more, we have created public private partnerships to reinforce academic achievement on all levels through mentoring, college preparatory programs like I Know I Can, non zero-tolerance behavioral discipline measures such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Systems (PBIS), and counseling services through Nationwide Children’s Hospital and Southeast Inc., that provide social emotional supports for children.

All of these intervention systems seek to provide teacher support inside and outside of the classroom. We passed a bond and levy campaign to ensure more social-emotional help and other resources in our schools. We realize that our approach must serve the “whole child,” and not just the teachers.

In final, we are in the public works of developing human beings in some of the most unfavorable social, economic and political community conditions.

Nine out of every ten students qualifies for free and reduced lunch. We must not only educate, but in addition feed and transport over 50,000 students per day. As a Board member and parent, I experience our children facing the high stakes of urban poverty and state mandated academic rigor.

Amy Harkins

We need to continually pressure our legislators to reduce the amount of state testing required in schools. We can also not take part in any pilot programs for new testing that further adds to the testing calendars in our schools.

Dominic Paretti

Invited but no response

Ramona Reyes

We must focus on laws introduced by our legislatures that impact our programs and our need to advocate for what's best for our students. The big issues are of continued educational budget cuts and increased testing. I will continue to support a focus on programs that are measured by student impact, measurable effectiveness, and scalability. Programs initiated by our legislatures must come with funding to be implemented and to ensure success. Often times they don't and that impacts student learning and classroom teaching. We continue to monitor these laws and have argued against them. We have reached out to ODE and other entities to assist us in combating these initiatives.

Erin Upchurch

As a Board Member, I believe one of my key roles is to support administration and internal stakeholders (teachers, administrators, etc..) to ensure that they have the resources they need to engage in the most important work of caring for and educating our youth. Simultaneously, I will be an unapologetic advocate at the state and legislative levels to reduce and hopefully remove the current mandate of high stakes testing.

Abby Vaile

Make all mandatory testing, until high school, paper and pencil. It has already been proven by research that this is better for our students. For both teachers and students, several very positive effects would also occur. Testing days would be reduced for the entire school. Schools do not have enough computers and must schedule individual classes for long test times. With paper/pencil tests, testing could be reduced to just a few days instead of weeks. And computer error and breakdown would be eliminated. Eliminate all extra "hype" placed around these tests, especially unneeded meetings. As a school board member, I would take a stance on working to eliminate testing at the state and national level. Teachers need to know that those around them are working to eliminate unnecessary tests.

Question 2. Will you fight against the city's giving tax breaks to developments when such actions reduce tax support for our City's Schools?**Michael Cole**

In my leadership role on the Board, I have worked to re-envision and redefine our relationships as a District with City Hall and other downtown stakeholders. I would like to re-establish a formal committee between the Board, City Council, and Mayor's office that regularly looks at matters of taxation, development, safety, and other critical community issues

In working with our District Superintendent and Treasurer, we have taken the opportunity to directly dialogue with local developers to negotiate terms that benefit CCS financially while providing long run gains for our students to access. One such agreement was with the owners of Nationwide Arena. The District not only negotiated nearly one million dollars in tax revenue, but also continued use of facilities for graduation ceremonies and other events for free.

I believe the District is poised to broker creative agreements that fairly compensate our schools and utilize partnerships that benefit our students.

Amy Harkins

Yes. I publicly spoke out against the Easton tax break that funneled millions away from our public schools. “I think we need to speak out every time a deal happens that will negatively impact the funding and stability of our schools, especially when that burden is transferred to our community. Our families are continually asked to pick up the tab while wealthy developers receive tax abatements. The school board needs a voice when these deals are proposed, and they need to stand up and speak out for the best interests of our students and our community.”

Dominic Paretti

Invited but no response

Ramona Reyes

I believe including the district early in the discussions is of paramount importance; while not required by law, such communications are vital to nurturing a mutually beneficial relationship between the city, developers and the district. Also, I am not fundamentally or predisposed against abatements or TIFs. I understand the economic development value of abatements and appreciate the city utilizing “non-school district” TIFs which keep the district whole. Again, the key in this situation and others should be early and open communications, which I did not receive as a board member. This allows me, the board, and the district to participate as appropriate and be able to form and respond with well-informed opinions on these projects.

Erin Upchurch

Yes. Over the past four years, it has been evident that the current Board has experienced some challenges balancing obligations to external stakeholders (private industry, other municipalities, etc.) with their obligations to the internal stakeholders, which includes the students, families and employees of our District. This has most recently been observed through negligent representation of the district’s interests when evaluating tax incentives for business. As a Board Member, I will prioritize transparency, accountability and operational efficiency. I will ensure this priority by maintaining integrity and morality in decision making; employing decision matrixes that place

children, families and employees first; and being unapologetic regarding the need for equality and equity as it relates to the vast resources in our great City.

Abby Vaile

I have and will continue to speak out against tax abatements in Columbus. A recent incentives policy evaluation was made showing the problems encountered with tax abatements, problems that the school board must be involved in remediating. I have not yet seen this happen. More than 60% of the taxes abated in Columbus are originally earmarked for our schools. It is imperative, and I will demand, that the school board be at the table for all tax abatement discussions. Abatements in Columbus have not been transparent, nor has there been any type of consistent accountability to show benefits of these abatements. This must change.

Question 3. What policies and practices will you seek to allow teachers to have more freedom and flexibility in how and what they teach?

Michael Cole

Currently, CCS uses a site-based management model that offers our building administrators and teachers more autonomy over curriculum. We understand that public education is not a “one size fits all” paradigm. Site-based modeling has been in effect since the first year of my tenure on the Board and has worked well from in-class learning resources to after school hours enrichment. Again, the Board also unanimously approved Records Day to ensure educators have the needed time to prepare lessons and track student progress.

Amy Harkins

With needs varying so widely across our large district, administrators and teachers need some autonomy in their budgets and in-service/professional development days to make decisions based on the needs of their particular populations. A one-size-fits-all plan has not been working to address the real needs of our schools. However, some basic resources need to be standard across the district: access to technology, appropriate learning environments, and similar amounts of funding, even if it is spent differently.

Dominic Paretto

Invited but no response

Ramona Reyes

Education legislation comes from entities outside the school board and therefore we must continue to work with ODE and the legislatures to advocate for what is enforced to be taught in the classroom by law. The board legislative liaison and administration work with the board to review policies and practices introduced and passed by these entities. I support teachers’ creativity when introducing subjects to our children and extracurricular activity request that enhance classroom teaching.

Erin Upchurch

My support for advocacy and reforms related to local autonomy and regulatory relief in some ways dovetail with what several of our advocacy groups have presented and lobbied for on our behalf. As a Board Member, my advocacy and support for teachers' freedom and flexibility will be centered on:

- ✓ Providing school districts with autonomy, flexibility and resources required to meet student needs;
- ✓ Using assessments as a diagnostic tool to improve instruction and learning.
- ✓ Enabling local boards of education to make decisions regarding the adoption of curriculum, textbooks and instructional materials, with advice and input from staff, parents, students and community members;
- ✓ Enacting state laws that support the use of discipline with students individually, in a way that is appropriate to their age, gender, mental health condition, emotional development and special educational needs while appropriately protecting the school's educational environment;
- ✓ Providing more flexible school schedules to adequately meet the needs of all students.
- ✓ Using data to ensure that EACH child has equal access to the resources necessary for a thorough and efficient education;
- ✓ Increasing the 1% cap on alternative assessments for students to a realistic 6%-7% reflective of the number of students with disabilities educated by the districts;

Abby Vaile

School systems must create curriculum that allows for greater teacher freedom. Eliminate "choice" schools and give every school equitable resources. Within individual schools, eliminate micro-management used on teachers and replace it with mentor teachers and professional development that is truly innovative. Giving teachers more time to plan will let them create more freedom within their own classrooms. Get rid of all non-teaching tasks that restrict teacher creativity.

Question 4. Do you support parents being able to "opt out" their children from high stakes tests?

Michael Cole

I support parental opt out with the caveat understanding that there may be consequences. The law is the law and unfortunately public schools are caught in the middle for reasons of either federal funding or state compliance to assessment/

achievement requirements of their respective states.

Our state legislature, Ohio Department of Education, educators, and parents must work more collaboratively to ensure rigor in our learning communities that do not continue to punish students. Fortunately, our state leaders are slowly coming to understand that education is a marathon with many milestones and pathways to success that include in class performance as much as standardized tests or assessments.

I take greater concern for students, particularly of color, being fast tracked to special education as a result of biased tests and assessments. Moreover, I share the same concern about test instruments that fail to capture our gifted children as well.

Amy Harkins

Yes. I opted my son out of the PARCC assessments the first year they were utilized in Columbus City Schools and helped to organize other parents at his middle school to do the same. Some children suffer anxiety from testing and it is doing nothing to enhance their education. It's actually preventing teachers from being able to provide hands on, direct instruction to students.

Dominic Paretti

Invited but no response

Ramona Reyes

We must focus on laws introduced by our legislatures that impact our programs and our need to advocate for what's best for our students. The big issues are of continued educational budget cuts and increased testing. I will continue to support a focus on programs that are measured by student impact, measurable effectiveness, and scalability. Programs initiated by our legislatures must come with funding to be implemented and to ensure success. Often times they don't and that impacts student learning and classroom teaching. They should also be attainable. Often time these decisions are made by individuals with not experience in education or regard to classroom impact. So, I would support our parents.

Erin Upchurch

Yes, I do support families opting out of high stakes testing. As a system we need to identify and implement diverse options for our students to demonstrate academic proficiency and aptitude. Assessments should be utilized as diagnostic tools to inform teaching and learning, instead of being a high stakes mandate that is punitive and exclusive in nature.

As a parent and clinical/mental health professional, I have witnessed the mental and emotional stress for our students caused by high stakes testing, and do not feel this is a life giving or affirming approach to education and achievement. High stakes testing does

not place the needs of our children as a priority, and has been proven as an ineffective measure of achievement and success.

Abby Vaile

I not only support parents being able to “opt out” of testing, I encourage it. There should be no school policy that restricts teachers, administrators or any school employee from discussing openly opting out of standardized tests.

Question 5. What should be the district’s strategies for retaining students whose families have pursued or are interested in charter school enrollment?

Michael Cole

I have not been the greatest proponent of charter schools. These academic enterprises have largely failed our children in urban schools. A key strategy to work towards retaining our students is community engagement based. I believe the following tactics will help us continue to grow and reclaim our student population:

- District informational sessions: "The District and Your Child"
- Grass roots marketing, I.e. require teachers and administrators to convene
- outreach efforts over the summer
- Better utilize District media assets such as our TV and radio station.
- Continue summer learning retention efforts with public-private partners

Amy Harkins

As a Board, district, and community, we need to dig deeper into the reasons families are leaving the district and opting for charter or private schools. We cannot retain students until we know the reasons why they are leaving and proactively address those issues on a district level. We need to do a better job of sharing the opportunities within the district whether it is the school lottery, specialized programs/schools, or career/technical training options. Many families leave for what they perceive as more specialized opportunities, but there are similar programs already happening within our district.

Dominic Paretti

Invited but no response

Ramona Reyes

As a district we have incorporated several strategies. The first is improving our communications to highlight our successes to the public so they truly believe they have a choice when sending their children to the district.

Letting parents know about our focus on programs that are measured by student impact, measurable effectiveness, and scalability.

The District has transformed its operations, mitigated the mistakes of the past, and rebuilt the integrity of information systems. This is supported by the hiring and retention of qualified staff, tightening up our policies, the creation of the finance committee, and a more transparent public process. We've worked to move the district to have increased accountability and transparency with a focus on responsible budgeting.

We serve as a model for Special Education in Ohio noted by the Ohio Dept of Education for urban schools on how we should identify and serve students with special needs, a total of nearly 8500 students in the district.

We are dedicated to staffing and staff development with more than 70% of our teachers hold at least a master's degree and an average of 13 years of experience and we support professional development to maintain high levels of excellence.

Our continued focus on laws introduced by our legislatures that impact our programs and our need to advocate for what's best for our students. We need to ensure that our partners are aligned with the academic goals and have effective results.

Erin Upchurch

As a district we need to engage with families who are pursuing alternative enrollment to determine the individual and collective unmet needs and barriers, and then work to address these barriers and identify solutions. Family choice is important and necessary, as is maintaining and ensuring access to quality public education. As the largest district in the state of Ohio, with over 100 buildings and access to local resources and partnerships; Columbus City Schools has clear opportunities to be innovative and progressive in the ways we approach educational needs and strive to reflect a 21st century learning environment. Our district should reflect the thriving vibrancy of our City and commit to becoming a district of choice for our families and members of the community.

Abby Vaile

Our district must get the positive stories out about our public schools. This should be stressed with all members of our public school community. Let people know what we are accomplishing with our students, what we're proudest of and making sure that everyone in Columbus knows about. This means that our school board, too, must be far more vocal in publicizing Columbus City Schools. I would start by seeing that all school board meetings occur where there is space for community involvement, scheduled at high schools throughout the city. Columbus City Schools must also increase its presence at community events. We must get the word out.

CAPE Ohio's Responses to Candidates after Interviews

We at CAPE Ohio met individually with each of the five responding candidates: Michael Cole, Amy Harkins, Ramona Reyes, Erin Upchurch, and Abby Vaile. After the interviews we sent a response that included our feedback to each candidate. The CAPE Ohio letters contained three paragraphs, with the first and third, reproduced below, being the same for all candidates. The second paragraph of each letter contains our response to the candidate. These responses follow the candidate's name.

CAPE Ohio thank-you letter, paragraphs 1 and 3:

My colleagues and I in CAPE-Ohio are most appreciative of your willingness to provide written responses to questions we had about your views on various educational issues. We were also very pleased to meet with you on September 28, 2017, for a face-to-face conversation to continue the dialogue.

[Paragraph 2 intentionally omitted. It can be found immediately following each candidate's name.]

The next step for our group regarding the information you have shared is to post your written responses to the questions we had asked you initially on our CAPE-Ohio website <https://capeohio.org/>. Our goal is to emphasize the importance of the upcoming board of education election and to encourage voters to use the responses provided by board candidates to make an informed decision when they cast their ballots in November. Our plan is to use CAPE-Ohio's social media accounts and our professional contacts to make Columbus voters aware of your campaign and the information you have shared. Please let us know whether we have your permission to share your written responses on our website. If you wish to provide us with a link to your campaign website, we can include this as a "for more information" link on our site as well.

Again, our sincerest thanks for your interest in and response to CAPE-Ohio.

Cordially,
Jim
James J. Bishop
Carol Dodson
Linda Fenner,

Margaret (Peggy) Kasten
Mark Stewart
Frances Strickland

CAPE Ohio thank-you letter, paragraph 2, for each candidate:

Michael Cole

Our group was impressed with your long-term commitment to the district, which you highlighted in many of your remarks about students, families and staff members involved with Columbus City Schools. Your experience on the board has made you a powerful advocate for policies and practices that can move the district forward with the leadership of a new superintendent. Your description of the negotiation process required to navigate complex abatement agreements with the city and corporate partners gave our group a perspective that all Columbus voters need to understand. It is also important for voters to understand your perspective as a board member is informed by many on-going interactions and relationships with students and staff as well as your insights as a Columbus City Schools' parent. You bring both professional expertise and passionate personal commitment to the work of guiding Columbus City Schools.

Amy Harkins

We applaud your willingness to step into the arena of electoral politics on behalf of children and families in Columbus City Schools. Your on-going involvement with the district on committees, in parent organizations, and with your own child's school experiences provide an important perspective for decisions about policies and programs that the board of education will need to make. Your message about the importance of innovation focused on students' learning is timely both in terms of the leadership change the district will soon experience and the challenges public education itself is facing. Creating a vibrant and inviting image for Columbus City Schools as part of your vision for the district is significant for the city of Columbus itself and should resonate

with its many stakeholders.

Ramona Reyes

Our group was impressed with your long-term commitment to the district, which you highlighted in many of your remarks about students, families and staff members involved with Columbus City Schools. Your tenure on the board has made you a powerful advocate for policies and practices that can move the district forward with the leadership of a new superintendent. We especially appreciated your explanation of a holistic strategy to move the whole district forward, the critical element in your vision for the district. We share your view that the new superintendent must make her or his chief priority the welfare of students and teachers. We could see in your responses and in our conversation together that you are the kind of life-long learner we want all our students to be. Clearly your learning experiences on the school board have been rich and reciprocal.

Erin Upchurch

We applaud your willingness to step into the arena of electoral politics on behalf of children and families in Columbus City Schools. Your on-going involvement with the district and your own children's school experiences have given you a keen understanding of the distinction between policies that strive for equality and those focused on equity. We agree with you that equity is a guiding principle much more consequential for students in Columbus City Schools. The school district, and equally important, the community needs this perspective as decisions about policies, programs, staffing and resources are made and communicated. Your message about the importance of educational transformation focused on students' needs--and how individual, varied and complex these needs are--is timely both in terms of the leadership change the district will soon experience and the challenges public education itself is facing. We appreciate the professional expertise and the personal, passionate commitment you bring as you seek this new role in support of public education.

Go to <https://www.upchurchforccs.com/> for more information.

Abby Vaile

Our group appreciated the perspective offered by your lifelong associations with the district as both a student and a district employee. In our conversation, you stressed the importance of relationships. Board members should establish active and visible relationships with the district's schools and with the community. These relationships support those individuals learning and working within the schools as well as enabling board members to communicate a sense of "what's actually going on" to the community. You also emphasized that the school board should be attentive to and vocal in matters such as tax abatements that have great impact on the future of the district. You reflected on many details of everyday life for the district's students, families and staff, including the challenges of state-mandated computerized testing in buildings that lack sufficient computers for administering the tests. You observed an advantage for the district is that expertise for policy recommendations often resides within the school district. You also hope to see more examples like the Weinland Park/Schoenbaum Family Center initiative in which community resources can be integrated into a "wraparound" educational model to serve families and students most effectively.

