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Biographical Question

1. *What can you tell us about yourself? Please include a brief outline of your relevant experience, including public offices held, and volunteer work.*

I have lived in Lexington for nine years and have three children in the school system, in eighth, fourth, and second grades. I have been an active volunteer in the schools throughout that time, and served on the boards of the Hancock Nursery School, LexFUN, the Fiske PTO and the Diamond PTA. I was elected to Town Meeting in 2014. I am the founder of the Lexington Parents Advocacy Group, an organization of parents from all nine schools committed to raising awareness of school overcrowding. In 2015, the School Committee appointed me to represent them on the Permanent Building Committee, and soon thereafter the Town Moderator appointed me to the Appropriation Committee, where I served as the liaison to the School Committee until I resigned to run for School Committee. In that position, I analyzed and reported on the school operating budget and school capital projects, as well as other proposed municipal appropriations.

I am an attorney with over a decade of experience as a litigator and in-house counsel. I took time off from practicing law to be home full-time with my children, but am now working part-time as a consultant, providing capital planning and school master planning-related services to other Massachusetts towns.

Candidate Platform

2. Why are you running for the School Committee?

I am running for School Committee because I believe there is significant room for improvement on some of the most important issues facing the Lexington Public Schools. Our School Committee's response to overcrowding has been largely inadequate, despite millions having been spent on planning. Important educational improvements have been passed over due to a siloed approach to the budget. Our students are performing well on tests, but are experiencing unhealthy levels of stress.

We can do better. We can truthfully acknowledge the immediacy and extent of our space needs and offer the voters the most cost-effective plans possible to meet those needs. We can prioritize within our operating budget to accommodate important educational improvements. We can pioneer new ways to deliver our curriculum that allow teachers more time and more freedom, and allow students opportunities to become more engaged, motivated, and healthy learners.

Most important, our School Committee must be willing to speak up for the needs of our students and teachers. Competing municipal projects and limited taxpayer resources will require negotiation and compromise but our School Committee members must come to those discussions with a clear mission: to advocate for what is best for our schools. I believe some have lost sight of that mission, which is why I am running now.

3. What are your short-term and long-term priorities for the Lexington school system?

In the short term, I would like to see a clear plan to move forward the recommendations of the 20/20 Vision Committee's Subcommittee on Asian Communities, to the extent they apply to the schools. I am honored to have the endorsement of the Chinese American Association of Lexington PAC and I look forward to working with CAAL and other members of our Asian communities to ensure that our schools are embracing and reflecting the wonderfully-diverse residents of our town.

I plan to support the Superintendent's efforts to explore innovative ways to deliver curriculum, including potential scheduling changes, homework policies, and incorporation of additional project-based learning.

The School Committee must develop a plan for the use of the Pelham Road property, ideally one that will use the property to meaningfully reduce overcrowding in our elementary schools. The School Committee will also need to support the Superintendent in formulating strategies for coping with immediate overcrowding at the elementary and high school levels, while longer-term plans for capacity building are developed.

Some of these short-term goals will extend into the long term, but my top priority for the long term is providing adequate space at the high school, preschool, and elementary schools. Despite a planning process that has lasted for more than three years, we have no adequate solutions in place. I am particularly well qualified to help the School Committee address these issues because of my

professional experience as a municipal capital planning and school master planning consultant, and my experience analyzing and reporting on capital plans for the Appropriation Committee.

Policy Questions

4. *How do you view the relationship between school spending, the quality of our schools in terms of teaching, programs and facilities, and the desirability of our community as a whole?*

There is no doubt that the quality of our schools, programs, and facilities make our community more desirable and our property values higher. Parents often move here for the schools, which is why our enrollment continues to increase. While more spending does not always improve quality, maintaining schools for a growing population is expensive. To help avoid unsustainable tax increases, we need to ensure that our investments in our schools – both on the capital side and on the operating budget side – are as prudent as possible. We must make smart long-term investments that meet student needs while maximizing value to our taxpayers.

5. *What is your view of the Lexington METCO program?*

I support the Metco program unequivocally. Since 1966 it has been a point of pride for the Lexington community. Metco benefits students who live in Lexington as well as those who live in Boston by bringing together children of diverse backgrounds and experiences and facilitating conversations, educational opportunities, and friendships that would not have occurred otherwise.

In the years that I have been studying our enrollment growth and advocating for solutions to overcrowding, I have heard many different groups of Lexington students blamed for our capacity shortage: recent immigrants, students who live in apartments, special education students, and, recently, Metco students. This inclination to blame others for our lack of classroom space is unacceptable. The desire to provide our children a high-quality education should be seen as a shared value among all Lexington families, not a threat, and we need to live up to our values by maintaining the strength of our schools.

Recent arguments that eliminating Metco would result in significant taxpayer savings have been largely debunked by the Superintendent. Moreover, while I would support working with our state legislators to increase state funding, I believe Lexington’s current investment in the Metco program is money well-spent.

6. *What should Lexington do to improve existing programs or to bring new programs to our public schools? How would you fund these changes?*

In general, I believe we must continue to improve our programs, services, and student experiences, even while we are making an effort to control our operating budget. Instead of automatically rejecting new programs that would add to the budget, the School Committee should determine the

relative priority of potential new programs, and explore whether lower-priority programs could be scaled back in order to offset the cost of new programs. I wish the School Committee had taken this comprehensive priority-based approach when it evaluated a proposal to return foreign language instruction to our elementary schools.

7. What are your thoughts on the current efforts to increase the resilience, health and well-being of our students and to decrease their academic and social stress?

Lexington has reached the pinnacle of public school achievement by traditional measures – our students receive great test scores and go to top colleges. Yet too many of our students report severe stress, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal thoughts. This means we need to try something new.

There have been some important improvements in recent years, such as the addition of WIN Block in the middle schools and I Block at the High School, which allow students extra time to seek help or to catch up on work. Our administrators have also made concerted efforts to dial back academic pressure. I will support the continuation of these practices.

I am also very enthusiastic about the Superintendent’s efforts to explore ways we can change curriculum delivery, which could simultaneously improve our students’ academic engagement, problem-solving abilities, resilience, creativity, and competence, and reduce unhealthy student stress. The skills our students are going to need to become innovative, productive adults are sometimes not emphasized in our current system of teaching and assessment. Whatever we can do to help them become more invested, enthusiastic learners – whether through project-based approaches, scheduling changes, or other methods – should be considered.

Finally, we need to ensure that those in our schools who are providing substance abuse and mental health care have the resources they need to reach students at risk.

8. Is the School Committee on the right track regarding school construction plans to address overcrowding? What changes, if any, would you like to see in regards to the school construction plans?

I work part-time as a consultant, helping other towns in Massachusetts with their capital planning and school master planning issues. This professional experience, combined with my experience on the Appropriation Committee as liaison to the School Committee, make me particularly qualified to help the Committee navigate complicated master planning challenges effectively.

The elementary planning process has been plagued by indecision, delay, distraction and waste over the past three years. Despite having spent millions of dollars on consultants and architects, we still do not have an elementary capacity-building plan that will meet our needs. If a new Hastings is approved, we will add nine classrooms to our system. According to the latest enrollment projections, we will fill those classrooms with just the elementary enrollment growth that occurs between now

and when a new Hastings opens in school year 2019-20. This means that the School Committee’s plan will do nothing to relieve any of the overcrowding that exists today, or that will exist after Hastings opens.

The incumbent candidate has stated that the School Committee should not even try to expand elementary plans, aside from possibly two classrooms at Harrington, until after a high school project is complete because the town cannot afford it. While I share her concern for the taxpayers, it is not the School Committee’s role to decide what taxpayers can afford. The proper course for the School Committee, in my view, is to (1) determine the space that is needed, (2) put forward the most cost-effective plan possible to provide that space, and (3) determine and communicate the educational and operating budget impacts that would result if the projects were not supported. Town Meeting, with input from the finance committees, and ultimately the voters will decide whether projects move forward. They may say yes or they may say no, but they will be counting on the School Committee to provide accurate information and cost-effective options for their consideration.

At the high school, overcrowding will reach a crisis point in three years, when a sixth grade class of over 600 students moves up. How to respond will be one of the most important issues facing the School Committee over the next few years. If I were on the School Committee, I would want to determine, as soon as possible, how much space we need, a rough range of options for providing that space, and approximately how much those options would cost. To make sound decisions about current school and municipal projects, the town should have a sense of what we may be asking taxpayers to pay in the future. I also believe we should add the high school project to our financing model, so that the boards and committees can make fully-informed choices about how to apply capital stabilization funds over the next few years. Finally, I believe it will be essential to obtain state funding for a high school project, so we must be prepared to start applying for it as soon as possible, and to keep applying until we receive it.

9. Is the School Committee on the right track in regard to redistricting as a mechanism for optimizing use of elementary and middle school facilities?

It is important to recognize that redistricting does not relieve overcrowding when nearly every school is either full, overcrowded, or severely overcrowded. It merely spreads the overcrowding around a bit more evenly. I believe it is an essential coping mechanism, but it will not solve our problem. Moreover, the protracted process of formulating redistricting and buffer zone policies, which took the better part of 2016, was a distraction from the School Committee finding real solutions for overcrowding. Meanwhile, those solutions have likely become more expensive.

All candidates are asked to limit the response to each question to at most two or three paragraphs, and to provide the questionnaire responses by end of day Sunday, Feb 19th, 2017. Responses will not be edited, and will run as submitted. They will be posted on lex-wiki.org in PDF format and announced through other town media. Questionnaire coordinator Andrei Radulescu-Banu (bitdribble@gmail.com, 617-216-8509).
