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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 service in Lexington schools.*

I am a successful software entrepreneur, with a successful startup (1998–2003) that capped a 30-year career in that industry. I then had an opportunity to pursue a life-long passion for helping kids, especially kids in school. I ran for the School Committee and was elected in 2004 and reelected in 2007. I served as chairman from 2006 through the end of the 2007–2008 school year, a period of high achievement for the committee and its schools. In 2008 I stepped down as chairman and entered an internship program to teach public school in Boston. I taught as a full-time intern in a Boston middle-school in 2008–2009 while I got my master's and then taught in a Boston middle school as a licensed social studies (and special ed) teacher, 2009–2014.

In my School Committee service, we hired Bill Hurley and Paul Ash and helped Paul Ash transition into the job. We did significant repair, working closely with Paul Ash, on budget problems, especially in the FY06–FY08 period. While I was chairman the committee created new institutions like the Department of Public Facilities, full-day kindergarten, the master building plan for new elementary schools through Estabrook, and five new in-house programs for students with special needs.

Candidate Platform

2. Why are you running for School Committee?

My main interest is always in kids and their teachers. I want to be sure kids are learning, that they are happy in the process, and that they are successful. Those things are the province of supportive parents and caring, expert teachers. I am committed to those goals and I speak out and advocate for them.

Superintendent Czajkowski will need expertise and advice. We face budget challenges as we cope with continuing rapid enrollment increases, and we will have lost the rest of our financial experts during the transition. Departures include not only the superintendent but financial officer Mary Ellen Dunn. IT Director Tom Plati also is leaving, at a time when we should be taking our use of computers from our present position to one of real leadership.

3. What do you believe are the priorities for our schools in the short-term and long-term?

My priorities are as follows:

- Bold school-town collaboration to reduce unnecessary stress on youth.
- New curriculum and learning opportunities for kids.
- Helping the new superintendent take the reins, with colleagues who are not only helpful in their inclinations but experienced and knowledgeable.
- Working with the new superintendent and new IT director on computer technology initiatives.
- Working with the new superintendent and new CFO on budgets, finances, and raising money through work within Lexington and at the state level.
- Developing a serious building program to address enrollment growth, and sticking to it.

Policy Questions

4. *Lexington public school enrollment is projected to increase in the short and medium term. Five of our six elementary schools and our two middle schools are running out of capacity. What are your priorities regarding school capital construction needs, and how do you see the role of the School Committee in this discussion?*

The role of the School Committee, at this point, is to use the results of the enrollment working group started at the end of 2013, building subcommittee work that it steered since May of 2014, and a \$250,000 spent on architectural studies, and come to a consensus on a building program. It must be unanimous and clear about the objectives of the program and must work with the other boards to be sure there are plausible financing plans. The process with the other boards also will ensure that other municipal needs, such as the need for new public safety buildings, are taken care of.

5. *What are your criteria for supporting a debt exclusion override to cover capital cost needs for school building construction?*

The major debt exclusion vote for school buildings would be in June–September 2016. A debt exclusion, I assume, would also be needed at that same time for public safety buildings. All boards and all supporters of these projects will need to work together in as unified a manner as possible, to make the overrides succeed. We have succeeded even with difficult ones, such as 2007, when that was true. We have failed, such as in 1997, 2003, and 2006, when that was not true.

6. *Academic Stress & At Risk Social Behavior: The Ad-Hoc Committee for Youth at Risk has presented its recommendations to the School Committee in Nov 2014. What should be the School Committee action plan to address academic stress & at risk behavior, and how would you measure whether it is successful?*

The school department is already taking steps internally, adding more counseling staff, reviewing homework policies, and like measures. School Committee members should also simply speak out about this issue. Make clear to all parents that the United States has hundreds of excellent colleges and universities and that we are not here to guarantee their kids a place at Harvard or MIT. Get rid of unnecessary grading systems and other phenomena that are meant only to position kids for college competition and that have no educational value. It takes courage for members to say and do those things, but there is no harm to the students or their future success.

All experts have been saying for years and years that the school department cannot do it all. Therefore there must be resources available out of school, provided by the municipal side of the government. School Committee people should work collaboratively with Selectmen to identify better programs and resources for youth recreation and youth crisis intervention and counseling, and we should work creatively on ways to finance and manage new initiatives.

One measure of success would be more smiling kids taking advantage of programs at the Community Center campus, and just more smiles everywhere. Another measure would be reductions in the numbers in our annual survey of risky behavior. Another measure would be evidence that our college matriculation and success rates are just as good in this new era, showing that much of the current stress and pressure is completely unjustified.

7. *Special Education (SPED) in Lexington: What are, in your view, its strengths and its areas that could further improve? What sources do you use to inform your opinion about SPED, and what would you do as a School Committee member to continuously improve the quality of SPED in Lexington?*

Lexington has had a leading special education program for many decades. During the time I was chairman of the School Committee (2006–2008), we progressed toward far more inclusion of students who previously had been educated only in out-of-district schools. Many students, for instance students on the autism spectrum have a good prospect for going all the way from K through 12 in our system; previously our upper grades had no programs for them. We should all be proud of that huge accomplishment, which required a courageous effort by the School Committee, the administration, and the finance committees that advise Town Meeting.

We should learn from that experience and face up bravely to future challenges. Doctors and scientists save more young lives every year. My own extended family has children who would not have survived if they had been born 15 years ago. Many such infants come to school a few years later with special needs. We have both a legal and moral obligation to provide them a “free, appropriate public education” in the “least restrictive environment.”

8. *The Lexington Minuteman reports that, on state assessments, “Lexington METCO students reached 100 percent proficiency in English/language arts, an improvement from 57 percent in 2007, [and] math proficiency increased to 96 percent from 68 percent in 2007”.*

How will the district maintain its level of focus on METCO student proficiency once Dr. Ash retires this June? Now that these high levels of proficiency have been reached on the MCAS, how would you measure success for the METCO program in the future?

METCO grew out of the efforts in the 1960s to equalize educational opportunities for students of color and to attempt to undermine and destroy racism by integrating classrooms. While other communities gave way to politicians who fought these efforts and earned themselves Federal civil rights suits, Lexington and a few other towns like it led the way to real progress.

Ever since the program started here in 1966, the integration has helped with the social side of things. Many of our children have friends from Boston whom they would never have met any other way, and that has built some solid bridges.

Lexington has an amazing, first-rate achievement on the academic front, as well. The numbers quoted in your question show that we have, as of just the last few years, eliminated the notorious “achievement gap.” MCAS scores measure learning in key subjects. (They do not measure study habits and all the other things that contribute to later success; grades are an important indicator of those.) As far as learning is concerned, African-American students learn as well as our general population. Almost no other ‘high performing’ districts can boast of that.

This achievement is a point of pride for many of us who have supported METCO for all these years on the political side. I have steadfastly defended the program, and I was one of the leading people who lobbied for and received increases in METCO funding, with the help of an assortment of people ranging from other local activists like Charles and Leona Martin, METCO director Jean McGuire, newly elected Governor Patrick’s education adviser Dana Mohler-Faria, and Scott Brown, who at the time was still a Republican state rep. To keep moving forward and to prevent any backsliding, we want to retain our commitment as a community to the program and management attention within the school department, especially to the academic parts of the program.

9. Lexington students come from a diverse community, with families of many backgrounds, with parents of varied professions, themselves schooled in different education systems from other US states or other countries. Parents have a range of expectations about how schools should be run, what constitutes student social/emotional wellness, and even what constitutes academic excellence and how it is measured.

How will you, as a School Committee member, use community input as part of your decision making process?

The question contains a premise with which I do not really agree. Parents certainly move here from many backgrounds expecting educational excellence by some definition. The United States is unusual even among developed nations for having millions of teachers working in a system of free public education, a system that has educated the overwhelming majority of our rocket scientists, industrial leaders, and government leaders. Our centuries-old commitment to public literacy, which started in New England, played a major role in the United States becoming the largest beneficiary of the Industrial Revolution. Our mechanics and artisans in the early 1800s, unlike their British counterparts, could read schematics and design documents, and off they went!

Almost everyone who wasn’t born here “moved to Lexington for the schools.” However, whether you moved here from another part of the US, from a US private-school background, from China, from India, from Israel, or from the UK, chances are the Lexington schools will not be quite what you expected. Everyone adjusts rather quickly. We all push for more academic achievement. We all want to get our kids into a good college. We all support the children who need special help in their education. And these days we all share the concerns about unnecessary pressure and stress, sometimes worrying whether we parents are contributing to it! We have learning scores (e.g., MCAS scores) that are among the best in the state. We have a highly educated parent population who are role models and supporters of their kids. There is no lack of community input. Those parents tell

School Committee members what they think is needed, and vote in elections, and at our best we respond with effective policies and programs.

10. Over the last year, can you describe one issue which the School Committee handled very effectively? And one issue that could have been addressed better?

I always struggle with “one issue” questions. There are at least two things that please me very much about the last year. One is the Committee’s embrace of elementary world languages and their commitment to returning them to the curriculum—an important exercise of its authority for the benefit of learning and cross-cultural understanding. Another is their committee work and budget support for more resources and policies to reduce student stress. I feel we should do far more about student stress but appreciate members like Mr. Alessandrini, who have worked on that issue for years and are doing something about it.

The school building program to address enrollment growth should have been addressed more expeditiously and more clearly. I feel the Committee has come up with a very plausible building program, but as of this writing, February 7, 2015, there are not enough people—even other government officials—who understand it and support it. We’re beyond the 11th hour. We need to open school in September 2016 with the first stage of relief for badly overcrowded classes at Clarke and its feeder schools, and at Fiske even earlier if possible. I am concerned that the program will be compromised while it is still on paper, and time is very short. These days I am communicating with elected officials and finance committee people because, whether or not I win the election, I want to see a workable plan more forward, and the first step has to be at Town Meeting in late March.

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 Saturday, Feb 7th, 2015. 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).
