

## 2019 St Paul DFL School Board Candidate Questionnaire – Mary Vanderwert

**1. Will you abide by the DFL endorsement? Yes or No answers only**

Yes

**2. Please give a brief bio and describe why you are running.**

I grew up in rural Minnesota, graduated from the University of Minnesota in Family Social Science, lived in Olivia, Marshall and Jackson in MN and in South Dakota, Illinois and Colorado. I brought my three young children back to Minnesota in 1990 to begin our lives again. All three children graduated from the St. Paul Public Schools and are doing well as adults. I have great empathy for what it takes for a family to survive with limited time and even more limited resources.

I have spent my entire professional career working with children and families mostly in Head Start and child care in Southwestern Minnesota, Ramsey County and all over the state. I provided training and technical assistance to Head Start programs as a QIC-D specialist in children's disabilities and as the Head Start State Collaboration Director at the Minnesota Department of Education. I understand systems and organizational development and I understand families and how children learn.

The last three years have been ones of great strides in SPPS and I have very much enjoyed the work to move the district forward. We hired a new superintendent, changed start times, guided the negotiations to avert a teacher strike, balanced some very difficult budgets, passed a referendum and have guided the development of SPPS Achieves, our latest strategic plan.

My individual contributions have included being instrumental in the adoption of a kindergarten entry assessment tool and one that is being used to guide instruction in the elementary years, introducing the School Resource Officers (SROs) to reflective practice that helped to reduce suspensions to 5 that year, connecting elementary schools to gardeners who provided instruction and real live plants in all of the classrooms, supporting daily toothbrushing in the K and 1st grade summer school classrooms and a number of elementary classrooms in the district throughout the year. I sit on the board's Policy Committee and have helped to implement new Special Education (SPED) policies, graduation attire, drug testing, intellectual property rights, bullying prohibition and others. And I am working closely with Rebecca Noecker, MaryJo McGuire and Toni Carter to lead the Citywide 3K effort. I meet with community groups regularly and have built a lot of productive relationships.

My plans going forward include finding ways to be more efficient in our spending, continuing work on the strategic plan and 3K planning, adding additional efforts to combat climate change (single use plastic ban, solar on our rooftops, less packaging for meals, etc.), and monitor the progress toward the academic goals set for our kids. My background in Head Start has been valuable in bringing the importance of family engagement and attention to health and mental health to the consciousness of our leaders. I bring a lot of unique expertise to this team. I am proud of what we have been able to accomplish over the last 4 years and I am motivated by the opportunities to address the challenges still facing our school district.

**3. What do you see as the skills students will need to succeed as community members, in the workforce and in college readiness in the next 10 years? Where are ways in which the District can improve to help all students succeed?**

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These are skills that I believe are essential to preparing students for life that are best taught and cultivated in our public schools:

- Verbal and written communication skills
- Ability to develop relationships to collaborate with others
- Critical thinking and the ability to defend ideas
- Creative Problem Solving
- Effective time management
- Appreciation for art, music and beauty.

I believe a key way in which the District can improve, in order to help all students succeed, is grounded in 3K and our investments in early learning. This is an area in which I have worked throughout my professional life. We have made progress in implementing a strategic plan and 3K planning, but this will continue to be my top priority over the next 4 years.

#### **4. Describe three programs and/or policies of St Paul Public Schools that you believe are working/effective.**

The variety of programs from which families have to choose is remarkable. There are language immersion programs in Spanish, French, Hmong and Chinese. The curriculum in these schools have been developed by SPPS teachers. Not only are students learning language, they are developing a world view that is open and adventurous as they explore the history, customs and values of another culture. Their brains are developed in unique and valuable ways. Families can also choose schools that have a focus on gifted and talented, creative arts, music, Montessori or their own excellent community school that provides access to community resources for students and families.

There are also a number of career pathways from which students can choose. There are pathways for automotive, agriculture, education health careers, technology, STEM and family and consumer science. Students are able to explore these careers in meaningful ways and some of them are able to earn certification while in high schools. PSEO or College in Schools programs and collaborations with St. Paul College and the U of M allow students to earn college credits while in high school saving students and their families hundreds of thousands of dollars individually and millions of dollars collectively.

The Parent Academy program is an effective program for parents to learn how to navigate the complexities of school. They learn about child development and hone their parenting skills and, most importantly, they develop a network of social supports for their families. Those from specific cultural groups especially benefit from this program.

#### **5. Describe three programs and/or policies of St Paul Public Schools that you believe need to be improved.**

The organizational culture of our schools needs to improve. There is a need to build trust between leadership and the front-line staff. When everyone is clear about the vision for our district and our students, and is pulling in the same direction, we can offer the excellent education our children deserve. The changes in leadership that are happening now will help support the vision for our culture to which the superintendent and board of education are committed. I will hold the leadership accountable for achieving the kind of organizational culture SPPS needs.

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There is still a lot of work that needs to be done around equity. The effort to ensure the development and academic success of each child is intimately entwined with bias and stereotypes that staff and leaders must fight every day. Recognizing that we have all inherited racist views because of our socialization and social messages is the first step in becoming the open and inclusive district we want. There is work to be done and it requires leadership and systems that support equity and ongoing professional/personal development. As we look at data and our policies, equity is the lens I use to ensure that we are building an environment that works for all students.

The budget process is complex and confusing for the community. Each year there are questions and misconceptions about how decisions are made. Communication about the process and the general contents of the budget need to be more easily understood by the community. Website information and community outreach are needed to ensure this understanding and to get feedback on the process. I will continue to push for clear and complete information around budgets that is easily available in our community.

**6. Describe the strengths you see in the Special Education program and what improvements you believe are needed. Please include a discussion of mainstreaming in your response.**

The Special Education leadership has changed over the last year and I believe the program is making progress. Mainstreaming all students with IEPs which was begun about 5 years ago resulted in chaos and did not work well for all. It has since been walked back so students have time in smaller settings with more individual attention if that is needed. When children with special needs are educated with their peers as much as possible, they all do better. Mainstreaming has meant for most that their classes are co-taught by a regular classroom teacher and a special education teacher. This allows for consistency and a common approach and is supportive for students and their teachers alike. When we serve children with special needs well, we serve all students well. SPPS also serves children with severe mental health needs with high teacher to student ratios in a building specifically designed for them. Students with seriously involved disabilities are taught in classrooms with teachers and staff who nurture their growth with love, understanding and high expectations. I will continue to advocate for earlier and more effective interventions for those with needs and a collaborative approach with parents to determine the services provided. I will also advocate for continued improvements in the funding formula at the state level to ensure the school district is fully and properly compensated for the services needed for all our students.

**7. Describe the strengths you see in the English Language Learners (ELL) program and what improvements you believe are needed. Please include a discussion of mainstreaming in your response.**

English Language Learners are an important student population in our schools. There are over 100 languages spoken in our schools so having staff fluent in all those languages is a challenge. Still there are many who are there for interpretation and support. These students have time learning English but spend most of their days in regular classrooms with ELL and regular classroom teachers co-teaching. Some classrooms have a regular teacher who provides the content for the day, a special education teacher and an ELL teacher all working together so students do not lose out on the content. Again, this provides support and professional

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development for the teachers and an environment where the needs of all children are met. This is an effective way for these learners to grow.

The systems for moving students along in their language proficiency involve testing and sometimes confusing ways of determining student needs. These systems need to be evaluated for their effectiveness and efficiency.

### **8. How can the St Paul Public Schools create and maintain a positive school climate/culture where all students and employees can thrive? Please include a discussion of Restorative Justice practices, School Resource Officers and Implicit Bias in your response.**

School culture starts with the leadership. Our school administrators at the district level and the individual school sites work hard to create a climate that is inclusive, supportive and focused on continuous improvement. Staff working with students have really hard jobs so it is important for them to know that their leaders “have their backs.” Children need to have clear expectations for their behavior and need to know how to fulfill those expectations. An intentional social skills curriculum embedded in the Positive Behavior and Intervention Supports (PBIS) is important in elementary schools. The Restorative Practices program is only one of the ways this can be done. Students learn how to solve problems, support each other and manage their own behavior.

School Resource Officers also play an important role in our senior high schools. They provide opportunities for students to develop relationships with officers who can handle issues that teachers cannot. For instance, students can ask for help with situations in their homes or neighborhood when school staff may not have the skills or resources to find solutions. They are there if there is a need for law enforcement with outsiders or between students/staff. I helped institute a reflective practice with two skilled social workers who helped them understand their schools better and the number of arrests throughout our district that year dropped to 5. This is one way to combat the implicit bias that exists in our world. There is much more that needs to be done on both a systems level and a personal level. We need recognition and understanding that racism exists in us all as a result of our socialization and the systems/stories to which we are exposed. Having a process in place for staff to process their reactions to students through the lens of bias is important in each school. Staff can challenge each other’s bias and support the changes needed.

### **9. Describe what you see as a positive working relationship between the school board and the superintendent.**

We have a superintendent that does an excellent job at keeping the BOE informed about what is happening in the schools and what changes he is making in school structure. The board meetings are well organized and information provided is relevant. Board members also meet with him individually each month to provide guidance and support and to respond to any burning issues. These contribute to a relationship that is open and collaborative. New ideas are considered and communication is respectful. A board’s job is to ensure that the vision and priorities for the schools provided in the community are the basis for any decision making. This can include challenging his decisions or providing new ways of addressing the challenges.

### **10. A budget is a moral document that reflects our DFL and community values. What values do you believe our St Paul Public School budget should reflect and how**

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**would you exercise fiduciary responsibility of the St Paul Public Schools budget to ensure that the budget we envision is realized? Please include your proposals for exercising review of capital budget project bidding and contract process especially as it relates to current sizable overruns.**

SPPS is currently implementing the strategic plan, SPPS Achieves. This plan is focused on improving student achievement and includes several new initiatives as well as, strengthening those practices that are effective such as Restorative Practices and PBIS. I believe the DFL and the community want to see better outcomes for our students. This plan will make progress toward that end and next year's budget will provide for more funding in the schools to make staffing more robust and will add learning leads to provide support and professional development for teachers in schools designated as needing improvement by MDE. Staffing at the district level will also be reorganized to provide for more coordination.

Because no one on the BOE at this time is an expert in construction and construction budgets, we have to rely on staff for our information. Updates on costs are provided quarterly and we have been aware of the rising costs of the projects. When in the middle of construction, there is not much that can be done when issues present themselves. The superintendent has asked for an outside group that will audit the processes for facilities projects and provide recommendations for improving the planning and contracting. We will continue to monitor the budgets for the projects and ask the questions that need to be asked in order to understanding the cost situations.

*Completed questionnaires must be emailed to [BethCommers@gmail.com](mailto:BethCommers@gmail.com) by 5 pm on Friday, June 14. Questionnaires will be put on the St Paul DFL website by Sunday, June 16 and will be made available to city convention delegates.*

*Also, please consider recording a 1-2 minute video clip that we will put on our FB page and link to on our website? You can post to our FB page yourself or email a link in a google drive to [bethcommers@gmail.com](mailto:bethcommers@gmail.com) Have fun with this!*

*Completed questionnaires will not be translated into additional languages. Hmong and Somali interpreters will be at the convention. You should feel free to connect with them for assistance in communicating with delegates. Delegates who need interpretation will be wearing headsets that link directly to their particular interpreter.*