

**Thank you in advance for reading my answers, and I hope you make it all the way through them. There are a lot of candidates, and thus a lot of information and perspective to digest. I welcome questions, feedback, and ideas around the below, and can be reached at [peter.for.d65board@gmail.com](mailto:peter.for.d65board@gmail.com).**

- **Student Achievement and Equity:**

- The achievement gap between Black students and their counterparts has continued to grow in terms of the percentage performing math and reading at their appropriate grade level. What is your specific plan to close that gap?
  - First, I think one challenge we always face in this conversation is the fidelity and interpretation of the data. There should be continued conversations around alternatives to standardized testing to help quantify improvements, and we should work closely with educators to establish that.
  - In terms of the data points we have, I don't think it was called out as loudly as it should have been, but black D65 students made a **42%** year-over-year gain in ELA for meeting/exceeding expectations from 2023 to 2024 (19% vs. 27%). That wasn't simply catching up from pandemic loss – that was a jump above where we were in 2019 (18%).
    - For comparison, white D65 students showed a 12.5% year-over-year gain during the same timeframe (64% to 72%)
    - While the comparative gap remains and should be prioritized accordingly, I am hopeful that some of what's driven that recent success in ELA will show up in further jumps in grade-level achievement.
  - Part of what I think makes me a strong school board candidate is not coming in with the assumption that I have all the answers. It's important to listen to experts, and the most expertise comes from current and former educators in our community who have the first-hand experience on which solutions are most impactful.
  - From many conversations around the topic of achievement, I think it's important to look at how and when we provide supports and interventions.
  - I'd like to see us expand early childhood and pre-k programming within the district, given the systemic opportunity gap in EC/PK options.

- The more experience we have with our more vulnerable students before they reach kindergarten, the better we can assess readiness and identify and close gaps so more kids are coming in prepared from day 1.
- Seems we've been prioritizing layers of administration over the critical supports and in our classrooms, and I think the lack of progress we've seen with our students below grade level in reading and math speaks to that.
- I think we need to lean on the Curricular Advisory Committee (CAC) and give teachers more agency in decision making, especially related to achievement/opportunity gaps and learning styles
- On EdTech...
  - While the board recently approved a new technology contract, I think we need to audit our policies around age-appropriate levels and reliance upon student-issued devices
  - There's research around the potential harms and pitfalls of this and there are countries in Europe actively going backward in their reliance on tech. Our tech policies should be rooted in research.
  - Over-reliance on these devices also has the potential to worsen achievement gaps, and it places an undue burden on parents and educators to implement controls to keep use educational and age-appropriate.
- How would you maintain an emphasis on equity in district decision-making in the face of our current fiscal challenges and potential cuts in federal funding assistance?
  - I don't think that fiscal challenges suddenly erase our values and priorities as a district. Though we have some difficult headwinds for the near-term, I believe that because of the extreme scrutiny that we're taking with our expenses, we'll come out of this with some long-overdue operational efficiencies in places we should have been tighter on.
  - Our main problem has been approving spending without proper regard for living within our budget realities. I think we can do that moving forward, with an acknowledgment from the board that we don't have infinite budget and must be judicious about where it goes. If we can't be responsible with our resources and creative in how we fund programs and services, we're left with less ability overall to build the equitable school system

- Now that the “Phase 2” SDRP reductions have been approved, one aspect I think we need to keep an eye on in “Phase 3” is class size. While Dr. Turner is touting how much we’re staying “within DEC guidelines”, the American Teacher’s Federation puts optimal class size at 15-19. We should be setting our goals around an ideal educational environment for students and educators alike, not simply patting ourselves on the back at abiding by contractual benchmarks. Keeping class sizes moderate yields the best opportunities for educators to provide differentiated education to meet each students’ varying needs rather than becoming over reliant on an iPad or Chromebook to do it.
- In terms of potential threats to federal funding assistance, I think this unfortunately is a risk that’s been compounded by a failure to sufficiently address deficits in recent years, eroding our reserves that could otherwise give us more of a safety net to protect programs. That said, it’s our duty to take care that we’re *not* caught in a place where we can’t provide support for some of our most marginalized children who receive critical funding through McKinney-Vento, IDEA, and ESEA Title 1. We should consider forecasting scenarios that consider delays or even outright elimination of that ~6% of our current budgets.
- What is your position on the district's adoption of standards based grading? Are there any improvements or changes you would make to the system?
  - My kids aren't in middle school so haven't been as directly exposed to SBG yet but my understanding is it is where future grading is headed but could have been scaffolded better.
  - Wholesale change requires much more substantial education to stakeholders (parents, caregivers, and educators) to understand it better and know what to do with it.
  - On a more general level, I think we should reduce the canned comments in grading and strive to provide more personal insight
    - This is why we need to really consider the importance of keeping class sizes under control as we look at consolidations, since moderation enables educators to provide more personalized comments/input. Most educators would prefer this, as teachers want to go deeper and have a collaborative relationship with families.
- Historically there has been a 70%-30% or a 60%-40% division between white children and Black children in D65. How would you address this

issue to ensure that all groups are equally represented with equal access at all district 65 schools?

- I think a lot of recent efforts have been implemented to ensure a level of consistency in access that we lacked historically across the district. We can and should continue auditing our resources to ensure we're not inadvertently creating or exacerbating opportunity gaps
- Our recently approved reduction in central office and shift to a "school-based" model provides us more opportunities for each of our schools to have better agency in advocating for their populations needs so we can better align resources.
- We also should have an understanding that at times, a school might run short-term evaluations of new approaches that could be scaled out more broadly if successful.
  - For example, if you look at what Dawes has been doing with their math program and looping, it's something that we can evaluate within one of our schools to explore replicating more across the district, especially where it can positively impact achievement for marginalized kids.
- Historically there has been a disproportionate representation of Black children, especially boys, being placed in special education. How would you ensure that the IEP isn't a life sentence for these students? What measures would you take to ensure that students are moving back into and have access to regular education classes?
  - I think a lot of it comes down to earlier interventions
  - We need to increase our Early Childhood and Pre-K supports to ensure kindergarten readiness, especially our kids most at-risk.
  - If children are not prepared for that transition when they're thrust into it, they're not set up for success and may be stuck in a longer-term need for IES.
  - Additionally, we should be more aggressive with implemented supports at the K-2 levels, as I've heard from staff that challenges at these grades are often deemed developmentally normal only to land kids in IEPs as they transition to 3rd grade and face more academic rigor.
  - I also think we need to do work to reduce the perceived stigma of IES, encouraging parents and caregivers that earlier access to extra supports gives kids the best opportunity to rely on them less down the road.

- How should D65 incentivize Black educators to go into teaching? Is equity at the forefront of the recruiting process?
  - The Chicago Teacher's Union just put out a staggering stat recently – black educators in CPS went from 50% to 20% over the past decade. Meanwhile, most suburban districts including Evanston have increased black educators – but there's also been more attrition. Retention is just as important as recruitment.
  - We need to establish exit interviews and ensure our black educators feel fully supported by administration. This is something I'm hopeful will increase as we shift to a more school-based model.
- In what ways have you contributed to and been involved with racial and social justice work in Evanston?
  - I have lived experience of growing up here and attending elementary and middle schools that left me with an understanding that not everyone was getting the same experience.
  - My candidacy for school board is my first major step on my public service journey, but as part of the process I think it's important any board candidate consider how they might round out expertise in areas that would be critical for serving this community as a board member.
  - For me, that could materialize through opportunities like Beyond Diversity and SEED training. It would be important for me to not just better understand racial and social justice issues in a general sense, but specifically in the context of public education
- What is your understanding of the historic educational system/experience in Evanston?
  - Having been a D65 student going through it first-hand gave me an understanding that we've had a lot of amazing and memorable educators across our schools, but kids' experience can vary widely.
  - I remember it being noticeable how differently kids were treated, and having attended some of our more racially diverse schools, I realize that some systemic biases existed that unfairly determined that treatment of my peers, and I know that unfortunately, many of those inequities persist today even if they've marginally improved.
  - Outside of my childhood experience, it's been eye-opening learning more over recent years about the last 60-plus year history of our district, from various openings and closures, enrollment ebbs and flows, and how we've really been kind of "stuck in neutral" in a sense since the '90s when you look at student assignment

mapping, facility usage and maintenance, and reduction in opportunity gaps.

- It's really important to understand how we got here if we expect to learn from the past rather than repeat it. That applies both to injustices that have endured decades as well as a board failing to carry out one of their main duties, which is to protect the assets of the district and provide oversight to keep us from situations like the one we're in currently.

- **Governance and Accountability:**

- What is the role of a school board member?
  - We need to reestablish clarity around these dynamics. The board is responsible for the ends, and the superintendent and administration handle the means to those ends.
  - The board's role is one of governance, and I think the lines have been blurred in recent years, where the board has weighed in more on the how/when/where and the superintendent on the who and what, and that's backwards based on the Illinois Association of School Boards (IASB) outlined definition of roles and responsibilities. This causes confusion in the community around who to go to, especially when we don't have a consistently responsive administration.
  - There are six principles the IASB lays out for a school board (source [here](#)):
    - The board clarifies the district's purpose.
    - The board connects with the community.
    - The board employs a superintendent.
    - The board delegates authority.
    - The board monitors performance.
    - The board takes responsibility for itself.
  - All are important, but I think the last one has been relatively lacking in recent memory, which has done significant harm to community trust. The IASB provides guidance around Board Governance Self-Review, and I think we should consider it moving forward to take stock of how we're doing, rather than assuming being voted or appointed onto our school board gives you a pass for the length of your term on accountability.
- What informs your decision-making process?
  - I like to ensure we have sufficient data to support decision making. That means asking questions around the setup of data/feedback

collection upfront to ensure we have sufficient representation upon which to make decisions. High-fidelity of data helps raise the bar of accountability and understanding of how we're tracking towards performance and objectives. It also provides the public a clear understanding of if we're being responsible fiscal stewards and affords us better objectivity in how we steer vision and policy.

- How should the board and district administrators be held accountable for priorities facing the district?
  - The optimal function should be the board holding the Superintendent accountable directly, and the administrators indirectly, since the administration is tasked with the day-to-day operation of the district and implementation of the vision and priorities established by the Board. However, the vision and priorities should involve sufficient and frequent feedback from the community. We need community engagement and input, but it has to matter, not just check a box.
    - How we collect that feedback matters. Opt-in email surveys tend to have skews, and we need to get beyond that to ensure our accountability is aligned to the broader community voice.
  - I mentioned it in a previous question but would reiterate that we need to
- A current board member recently stated during a meeting that the current superintendent was to be commended for not "sweeping the current financial challenges under the rug, which she could have done, but facing them head on". What is your view of the oversight role that the board has regarding the district leadership team?
  - Similar to the above questions, the board is responsible for employing a superintendent and providing oversight to that person against defined objectives and performance metrics. I'm not sure how Dr. Turner would have been able to sweep the current financial challenges under the rug, given how dire the circumstances have gotten, but it does seem like most people would not have trusted the current board to come to the conclusion we needed these significant reductions without the warnings given by Dr. Grossi.
- What is your position on the potential merger of D65 and D202?
  - I think it's something worth considering, but not as a bail-out to the current deficit.
  - It's more of a mid to long-term conversation. There are certainly benefits:

- less administrative redundancy
- stronger connection between our PK-8 and high school education, potentially yielding enhanced and necessary focus around 8<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> transition
- better ability for D65 to share benefits of fundraising. Look no further than this auditorium, which is about to be renamed for a donor giving \$7M to 202
- All that being said, the next board would need to discuss it without it impeding more immediate and critical priorities.

## District Priorities and Policies

- What are the top priorities facing the district?
  - The most obvious and immediate one is getting us back into a stronger financial position. While we have to make some fairly near-term decisions, I am hopeful we will take care not to be short-sighted and make ones that create more problems down the road.
  - Another is achievement isn't where it needs to be – it seems like we've somewhat regained the "Covid losses", but we're still lagging as a whole and still leaving behind many of our most vulnerable kids.
  - We can improve this through things like expanding access to EC/PK, curricular audits with our educators giving more input, and taking a more critical lens on the risks vs. benefits of our reliance upon educational tech.
  - Lastly, one thing that seemingly unites the community lately is frustration and mistrust. If we want to talk about being transparent and accountable, the actions of our leadership have to reflect that. Otherwise, it's just empty words.
  - This next board has the opportunity to regain the critical trust of the community we serve, the community who acts as a partner in the formative years of the children who walk through the doors of our schools.
- Do you believe that Northwestern University should play a role in addressing the academic achievement gap in D65? If not, why not? If so, how so?
  - I do think Northwestern should have a deeper commitment to local public education, but primarily from a financial standpoint.
  - This ultimately can be both directly and indirectly related to addressing academic achievement and opportunity gaps in D65, but I think the most likely way to get meaningful contributions is by offering more tangible opportunities and benefits.
    - To my knowledge, simply pointing to the fact that they don't contribute through property taxes or general calls to simply give D65 money have been ineffective.

- Directly, this could look like contributing to STEM or other specialized program where Northwestern and/or distinguished alumni are a named partner. Indirectly, this could come in the form of something like a name on a building/wing or a fleet of purple buses (either NU or D65-owned) that serve our students during the week and can be used the shuttle people for university events on weekends.
- Securing funding that saves us money in other places ultimately frees up more to allocate to core district goals, like closing the opportunity gap. If our superintendent/administration don't have preexisting relationship with the NU stakeholders we'd need to bring in, it's something to consider in within our recruiting practices for central office roles in the future. It's not as easy for a PK-8 school system to pull in large alumni donations like the \$7M one recently made to ETHS. However, we should have some focus from our central office on external funding avenues (including NU) to explore more creative ways to fund our programs, services, and facilities.
- What is your position on the residency requirement for D65 senior cabinet leaders? Beyond a residency requirement, what is your expectation for senior cabinet leaders to demonstrate Evanston community involvement?
  - Why wouldn't we want key stakeholders of our community to want to live in it? A residency requirement ensures people have skin in the game. I know people mention being able to grocery shop without getting bombarded, and I understand that, but it also comes with the territory of being a community leader in a place where people care deeply and want to engage.
  - Establishing community connections is vital for senior administrators because we need to create a consistent feedback loop for community engagement. We can't just rely on opt-in email surveys for that. Senior cabinet leaders should shoulder their share of the load with the superintendent, and when we say community involvement, the actual school buildings are included in that. The more visibility our central office administration has in our buildings, the stronger our relationship will be between them and our staff and students in classrooms.
- What is your position on the Foster School construction project?
  - Assuming we continue to stay on schedule and on budget, the next board will be responsible for ensuring the successful completion of the construction project and that the school itself is set up for success from Day 1.
  - I support the central core of Evanston having a school as the community anchor that's been denied for far too long while putting a disproportionate burden of bussing on a marginalized community for integration purposes.

- I think our leadership has frequently botched the communication around the process, leading to confusion and unfortunately, eroding support. It's more than bussing and walkability, and there hasn't been enough emphasis around why it's critical and logical to have a school where this one is being built.
  - I see a strong value in neighborhood schools as a community anchor and understand why that was important for this part of our community.
  - We can acknowledge that this could have been done in a better way, in terms of the actual building we're constructing (we've cut many corners vs. the initial vision) and the way it's been financed, while also maintaining an understanding of its importance to the people living there.
- There are currently no graduation requirements or minimum attendance requirements in D65. What is your position on graduation requirements?
  - I think we should address chronic truancy/absenteeism aggressively, not from a punitive fashion, but in terms of outreach with parents and caregivers if we're seeing students trending towards the IL-defined thresholds for absences. This shouldn't solely be in the form of a boiler-plate notification, but a personal effort to address barriers to attendance since each student's situation is unique.
  - In terms of graduation requirements, I think it's worth consideration to better assess readiness across *all* our transitions (PK to K, 5<sup>th</sup> to 6<sup>th</sup>, 8<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup>) and establish clear standards needed for progression.
- What is the District's responsibility to provide and implement research based effective early intervention to our most vulnerable learners? (reading, math, writing, language)
  - It's absolutely critical. I wish we'd allocated more of our budget in recent years to those supports and less to inflating our central office. But when and how those interventions happen matters.
  - Earlier interventions create better outcomes later. We need to expand our Early Childhood/Pre-K programming so that it's more accessible and to reduce opportunity gaps that exist before kids arrive for kindergarten. As an example, it was shared at a recent board meeting that 400 families in our district would qualify for Head Start, but we only had 87 spots to offer.
  - Once they're in kindergarten, I'd want to ensure we're giving more consideration to Individualized Services early to reduce the need for those supports later.
    - I've heard from our early grade educators about IES being denied on the basis of problems considered "developmentally normal" in

K-2, which may ultimately do more harm and lead to a greater gap by 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and beyond, which academic rigor increases.

- I think we should evaluate whether our shifts from reading specialists to more “collectivist” interventions have had the intended impact. Literacy is the key than unlocks all other learning, so it’s a critical one to address as early as possible.
- How can we ensure that families, teachers, and students have a voice in selecting culturally relevant curriculum?
  - Increase the voice of the Curricular Advisory Council. Our staff in classrooms daily have the best insight and expertise on what is effective, especially our most-tenured educators.
  - Solicit community input beyond opt-in email surveys, ensuring we give as many people a voice as possible to ensure a representative sample
- What is your position on the current balance in D65 between SEL and the district's expectations for student academic achievement?
  - I would want to gather more feedback from our staff in the classrooms on this to inform any adjustments to the balance in curricular focus.
  - A child's social development is a critical part of their early experience in school and helps them become well-rounded individuals.
  - We also live in an increasingly challenging world for children socially due to the hyper-connectedness of society. Schools now face the elevated challenge of kids with shorter attention spans and interpersonal skills, so SEL is an important component of our overall education.