

**Alexandria School Board Candidates Forum**  
**Sponsored by Tenants & Workers United and Grassroots Alexandria**  
**Del Ray United Methodist Church**  
**October 3, 2018**

**Opening Statements**

**District A**

**Bill Campbell:** Campbell is running for his third term on the school board. His life experiences and board and commissions experiences qualify him for another term. He has worked with TWU and NAACP.

**Jacinta Greene:** Greene moved to Alexandria in 2002 and worked as the Democratic Committee volunteer coordinator. She comes from a family of educators. Her experience includes work as a voter registration volunteer and she is a member of the Alexandria Commission for Women. She emphasizes the four Cs: capacity, collaboration, commitment to teachers and closing the achievement gap.

**Chris Harris:** Harris graduated from TCW in 1992, and his three kids also went through ACPS schools. He is the president of NAACP Alexandria and sits on the Alexandria Human Rights Commission. He was the TCW football coach for three years and has been a substitute teacher at TCW and Minnie Howard. His focus is taking care of teachers, expanding equity and dealing with ACPS' capacity issues. His qualification on the latter issue stems from his engineering background and knowledge of construction through his work as an occupational safety engineer.

**Michelle Rief:** Rief is 12-year resident and has three students ACPS: Mt. Vernon Community School and GW Middle School. She has been very active in the PTAs and is an officer on the City's PTA Council, supporting Latinx representation there. She has lobbied in Richmond for more funding and less testing for Virginia students. She is an adjunct professor at NVCC teaching U.S. and black history.

**Marc Solomon:** Solomon's focus is on community justice – he is a security expert emphasizing keeping people safe from gun violence – without more guns and without punishing students of color with disproportionate discipline. All children in ACPS should have access to a world class ed; Alexandria's strength is its diversity.

**Chris Suarez:** Suarez' background includes growing up in the Chicago school system and teaching 6th grade in Chicago Public Schools. He is an attorney who has litigated on behalf of minority students and wrongful disciplinary actions. He feels strongly that all students should get opportunities regardless of their backgrounds. He also will work to bring the ACPS infrastructure into 21st century.

**District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** Anderson is a lifelong Alexandrian who went to Maury, Lyles-Crouch, GW and TCW. Her children went through the ACPS school system. She was on the PTA board for Beverly Hills Preschool and was first a Scholarship Fund donor and then Scholarship Fund board member. She wants to serve again to complete the work begun during the last term, which included opening a new elementary school.

**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** Cosgrove is a self-described policy wonk who brings the perspective of new parents moving into the city. She too is the product of public education who believes board members should reflect the city's population. She is committed to investing in and supporting public schools at every level.

**Margaret Lorber:** Lorber is a long-time resident (38 years) whose children have gone through ACPS. She spent several years as the division-wide bilingual family liaison, which experience opened her eyes to the challenges for many public school families. The huge population growth has also been challenging. She is committed to expanding capacity and serving all families in an equitable way.

**Veronica Nolan:** Nolan has spent 20 years in education field. She taught Spanish and English in high poverty schools, was the CEO of a non-profit, and board member of several youth services organizations. She has been an ACPS parent for eight years and wants to continue the progress of her last term, including engaging the community, supporting teachers and working on facilities and capacity issues.

**Abigail Wacek:** Wacek is a 2006 TC Williams graduate who returned to the area in 2010. She said we must listen to the teachers and increase and improve vocational training, including ROTC. She believes we need to understand that one education plan cannot fit all students and that we should prepare students for whatever their chosen path is. There is not just one path to success.

### **District C**

**Megan Alderton:** Alderton has spent 15 years as special education teacher at three ACPS schools and is currently working at the district level to improve the quality of those services. She believes board members need to understand more about curriculum, instruction and special education, and to be passionate about student achievement.

**Ramee Gentry:** Gentry is an incumbent candidate with three focuses: accountability, access and achievement. The school board needs to ask for the right kind of information now from ACPS for accountability tracking. We need to assure that all students have high quality facilities programs and resources to access so they can achieve success.

**John Lennon:** Lennon has been a resident since 2002, and retired from the federal government six years ago. He has volunteered extensively in the school system, including tutoring in Minnie Howard and Jefferson-Houston. He has also had involvement with PTAs and PTAC, budget work and the 2020 stakeholders committee. He believes in closing the achievement gap, providing extra resources to both EL students and TAG students. He is endorsed by the Education Association of Alexandria.

**Dianara Saget:** Saget is a long-time resident, and graduated from TC Williams in 1995. Her three children have been in the public schools. She believes there are major equity problems in the city. She feels that the system needs to be more careful about determining if students need special education services and that the learning difficulties may have more to do with trauma. Her experience with ACPS convinced her to run for a school board position.

**Heather Thornton:** Thornton hopes to be part of a movement of representative leadership of people who do not have children but who care about the school system. She wants to use diplomacy on the school board to build on established successes, strengthen the Restorative Practices program and eliminate discipline disparities. She has interned in a juvenile court, taught Spanish in Mexico, is a former diplomat and has studied and worked in six countries.

**Question 1: TWU, NAACP Alexandria, and more recently Grassroots Alexandria, have been battling for many years with the school to prison pipeline. Out of school suspensions have disproportionately affected students of color in ACPS and rose last year to 787 total district wide. The middle schools accounted for over half the total out of school suspensions. What would you support as a remedy?**

### **District C**

**Heather Thornton:** This is a nation-wide problem; there is an urgent need to expand Restorative Practices in ACPS. Disparities exist and she wants to use a holistic approach to eliminating them.

**Dianara Saget:** She believes ACPS needs to have fidelity of established practices owing to the experience of her own children, who she removed from ACPS because they were suspended in elementary school.

**John Lennon:** Need to use already-established practices but institute at the same level throughout the school system; also need to rebuild relationships that have been eroded by distrust.

**Ramee Gentry:** The system saw positive trends (decrease in suspensions) this past spring, with a reduction in the category of “disruptive conduct.” She wants to continue support for Restorative Practices.

**Megan Alderton:** ACPS needs to start with teachers: high quality instruction is the best behavior management tool. Instruction cannot be separated from behavior. The Restorative Practices model has a bottom tier, tier 1, that supports everyone. Robust practice in the bottom tier is necessary for improved Restorative Practices.

### **District B**

**Abigail Wacek:** She is not sure what, exactly, the system gets out of suspending students – who is the system really punishing. Restorative Practices are interesting in concept, but she would like to see results from other areas using the program before putting in more money.

**Veronica Nolan:** She has been a teacher in high poverty environments (including prison populations). We need a strong cultural acceptance of positive discipline and Restorative Practices and to listen to all: teachers, students and the community for solutions.

**Margaret Lorber:** In the past she pushed for in-school, not out-of-school suspension, but the attempt was not staffed properly. Her education about Restorative Practices has come from TWU. The system needs a culture of acceptance and respect for all its students.

**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** She believes that suspensions do not work as a disciplinary tool – there were 13 kindergarten students suspended last year. The system will need to establish Restorative Practices with fidelity, but also to continue cultural competency training.

**Cindy Anderson:** She is a supporter of Restorative Practices but wants more mentoring and cultural competency training. The data shows some students are suspended multiple times; we need a different plan of action for these kids.

### **District A**

**Chris Suarez:** Wants to eliminate “zero tolerance” practices and provide due process. We need compassionate discipline that is educational in nature (community circles, student courts).

**Marc Solomon:** Supports Restorative Practices; the data indicates students are suspended for fighting and weapons – we should be addressing the issue of violence first.

**Michelle Rief:** We should be raising awareness. We need to keep kids in school, develop our Restorative Practices program in order to give students the skills to have positive relationships. She helped bring TWU reps to PTAC to present on Restorative Practices.

**Chris Harris:** We should fulfill the promises of education for all students, realize “disrespect” is too subjective and vague a reason for suspension. We need full time restorative justice coordinators and to remove subjective offenses, train our teachers in relationship building. We need transparency for accountability purposes.

**Jacinta Greene:** She works with ARHA students. The system needs to increase the number of Restorative Practices coordinators with clear and concise training. The goal is to prevent minor behavior problems from escalating.

**Bill Campbell:** Believes the most important thing is believing all kids can succeed – the last two superintendents believed this. He feels the budget is moving in the right direction with the funding of cultural competency training. Believing in the ability of all students must be reflected in the budget.

**Question 2:** In ACPS, school resource officers (SROs) are called on to handle minor discipline infractions. What are your thoughts on the role of school resource officers in our high school and middle schools?

## **District A**

**Bill Campbell:** ACPS SROs are all members of the Alexandria Police Department. He believes they are wonderful officers and they are there to become part of the school and to help and assist, not to handle the disciplinary problems.

**Jacinta Greene:** Safety is the most important issue; SROs are in place for safety. Teachers should be trained adequately, particularly in cultural competence, so behavioral problems are dealt with by teachers.

**Chris Harris:** Having SROs is a good idea, but they need to understand the diverse backgrounds of the students and their issues at home. SROs should build relationships with the students. The reality should be “understand,” not “punish.”

**Michelle Rief:** She has concerns about SROs and doesn't support the presence of SROs in more schools. She does not want to support policies that contribute to the school to prison pipeline; her past experience has taught her that we need to stop policies that move students into the criminal justice system.

**Marc Solomon:** Believes there are some bad cops, but most are really good. SROs must be good cops. By law they are required to be armed; they shouldn't be called for minor discipline issues when they must carry a gun.

**Chris Suarez:** His mother is a police officer, so he has respect for them. SRO roles should be limited to developing relationships with students to thwart school shootings. Teachers need to be trained to deal with minor infractions.

## **District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** She wants to see parameters for the SRO role. Her experience is that they are there for community building. When she was in middle school, there was an outing for middle schoolers so SROs and students could build relationships.

**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** SROs should be included in cultural competence training and must understand the context of each student.

**Margaret Lorber:** She is in favor of the community policing approach and building relationships to prevent problems in schools.

**Veronica Nolan:** SROs are there to ensure safety specifically, not to deal with minor infractions. If that is happening, the board needs to review data to ensure positive effects.

**Abigail Wacek:** School shouldn't feel like prison – you get out what you put in. If you expect violence, you get violence.

## **District C**

**Megan Alderton:** She believes there should be SROs in the schools – she has worked in the middle schools and those SROs have great relationships with the students. Calling them for minor issues is a classroom management problem. It's the principal's responsibility to ensure teachers are trained in classroom management and behavior.

**Ramee Gentry:** She says the data show that SROs are not getting called for minor infractions. As chair of the school board, she emphasized working with the City and developing the relationship between the police department and the schools so that it can be the best it can be.

**John Lennon:** School safety is important. 1. ACPS has the ALICE (alert, lockdown, inform, counter and evacuate) program; 2. Every community should have a “See something, say something” culture; 3. SROs should be the *only* school personnel who are armed.

**Dianara Saget:** SROs can be an asset, but they should not be in full uniform and should not be armed.

**Heather Thornton:** “It takes a village,” and we should include SROs in our village. We should train the SROs in Restorative Practices, which should be 80 percent preventative.

**Question 3: Some would argue that the International Academy at TC Williams enables a culture of segregation. Do you agree? Why or why not?**

**District C**

**Heather Thornton:** Doesn't believe the Academy encourages a culture of segregation. She remembers studying abroad and feeling lost until she found other students like her. Agrees that students need some type of support to help with the transition to the larger student body.

**Dianara Saget:** Agrees that the students can be in a separated environment until they get used to how school works here. High school can be overwhelming.

**John Lennon:** He was a tutor at TC Williams and never heard it was segregated. Everyone should mix during the day. It is a benefit to be able to communicate with people in your own language.

**Ramee Gentry:** It is a successfully proven model that has worked in other districts with recent immigrants. It is now also in Hammond, which gives the opportunity to be there in middle school so the students then can move into the regular population at TC Williams.

**Megan Alderton:** Inclusion is not a place, it is giving every student everything they need to succeed. The Academy is a good model, if they need it to be comfortable, we're doing the right thing.

**District B**

**Abigail Wacek:** "Why is this still a question?" Talk to the teachers to see if they feel this is segregating the kids or is best for the kids. We need to know what the teachers think.

**Veronica Nolan:** She has visited the Academy and it seems to meet the students where they are; the teachers and counselors there are very passionate. The challenge is to ensure the students also feel a part of the larger TC Williams community.

**Margaret Lorber:** Doesn't believe it segregates the students. It helps new students acculturate, get more comfortable, feel empowered.

**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** This approach was created as a response to our community. It serves the unique needs of Alexandria students. It honors a deliberate pathway to academic success. If they need to feel more like a part of the TC Williams community, we need to do more to accomplish that.

**Cindy Anderson:** She has heard these concerns from those not in the Academy, that the Academy students are being left out of general community. Extracurriculars may provide the bridge.

**District A**

**Chris Suarez:** If that is the case, we need to do better, but research reflects that the students do better not within the general population at first. But we must make sure they are not excluded. He is concerned about a social capital gap; the students do need transition to the general ed population.

**Marc Solomon:** He met with Academy students, and they do feel slightly left out – they are generally satisfied, but want more integration in the TC Williams general community. He believes segregation starts with pre-kindergarten and he believes in universal pre-kindergarten throughout the system.

**Michelle Rief:** There is a culture of segregation throughout the system. Her daughter was told honors classes were better for her because the other classes had "problem kids" in them. There are two sets of expectations for children.

**Chris Harris:** There are always doors open for the possibility of segregation. Keep the focus on equity, inform the families, care about the students and make sure the students transition into the general population.

**Jacinta Greene:** Does not believe the Academy enables a culture of segregation. The schools are partnered – the program reaches out to community partners so the students come prepared. There are places/activities where the mainstream population and academy students can be together.

**Bill Campbell:** We belong to the national association of international academies and we must follow the national guidelines. We should listen to the students, and if they feel segregated, we need to provide resources so they can feel more integrated: through courses or extracurricular activities.

**Question 4: YES/NO**

**Restorative Practices has reportedly been expanded to 8th-12th grade in ACPS, yet many students state its implementation is inconsistent--and out of school suspensions have increased. We'd estimate \$300,000 is needed in order to have an adequate number of Restorative Practices coordinators and trainings to expand the program. If elected, would you allocate funding of this amount?**

**District A**

**Bill Campbell:** Yes  
**Jacinta Greene:** Yes  
**Chris Harris:** Yes  
**Michelle Rief:** Yes  
**Marc Solomon:** Yes  
**Chris Suarez:** Yes

**District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** No  
**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** Yes  
**Margaret Lorber:** Yes  
**Veronica Nolan:** Yes  
**Abigail Wacek:** No

**District C**

**Megan Alderton:** Yes  
**Ramee Gentry:** Yes  
**John Lennon:** Yes  
**Dianara Saget:** Yes  
**Heather Thornton:** Yes

**Question 5: YES/NO**

**Four years ago, TWU was encouraged to create our own student survey, yet nothing happened. If elected, would you support a student led student survey that measures cultural competency, respect and school climate? TWU would be happy to lend support in these efforts.**

**District A**

**Bill Campbell:** Yes  
**Jacinta Greene:** Yes  
**Chris Harris:** Yes  
**Michelle Rief:** Yes  
**Marc Solomon:** Yes  
**Chris Suarez:** Yes

**District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** Yes

**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** Yes  
**Margaret Lorber:** Yes  
**Veronica Nolan:** Yes  
**Abigail Wacek:** Yes

**District C**

**Megan Alderton:** Yes  
**Ramee Gentry:** Yes  
**John Lennon:** Yes  
**Dianara Saget:** Yes  
**Heather Thornton:** Yes

**Question 6: YES/NO**

**Research on the effects of pre-kindergarten education shows that those children enter school ready to learn. Will you commit to supporting funding for Pre-K for all ACPS elementary schools?**

**District A**

**Bill Campbell:** Yes  
**Jacinta Greene:** Yes  
**Chris Harris:** Yes  
**Michelle Rief:** Yes  
**Marc Solomon:** Yes  
**Chris Suarez:** Yes

**District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** Yes  
**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** Yes  
**Margaret Lorber:** Yes  
**Veronica Nolan:** Yes  
**Abigail wacek:** Yes

**District C**

**Megan Alderton:** Yes  
**Ramee Gentry:** Yes  
**John Lennon:** Yes  
**Dianara Saget:** Yes  
**Heather Thornton:** Yes

**Question 7: YES/NO**

**High rates of suspensions are still a problem and it's time to do an analysis of what the problem is. Do you support the creation of a task force or committee to examine ACPS disciplinary practices?**

**District A**

**Bill Campbell:** Yes  
**Jacinta Greene:** Yes  
**Chris Harris:** Yes

**Michelle Rief:** Yes  
**Marc Solomon:** Yes  
**Chris Suarez:** Yes

**District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** Yes  
**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** Yes  
**Margaret Lorber:** Yes  
**Veronica Nolan:** Yes  
**Abigail wacek:** Yes

**District C**

**Megan Alderton:** Yes  
**Ramee Gentry:** Yes  
**John Lennon:** Yes  
**Dianara Saget:** Yes  
**Heather Thornton:** Yes

**Question 8: YES/NO**

**Do you think Immigration and Custom Enforcement (ICE) should have access to our schools?**

**District A**

**Bill Campbell:** No  
**Jacinta Greene:** No  
**Chris Harris:** No  
**Michelle Rief:** No  
**Marc Solomon:** No  
**Chris Suarez:** No

**District B**

**Cindy Anderson:** No  
**Jewelyn Cosgrove:** No  
**Margaret Lorber:** No  
**Veronica Nolan:** No  
**Abigail wacek:** No

**District C**

**Megan Alderton:** No  
**Ramee Gentry:** No  
**John Lennon:** No  
**Dianara Saget:** No  
**Heather Thornton:** No