

# EduPAC, Inc.

## Promoting Quality School Board Leadership For The Atlanta Public Schools

### 2011 School Board Candidate Written Questionnaire

Name Dwanda Farmer

District 2

Please respond to the following questions in the space provided by **typing or printing** your responses.

#### 1. Why do you want to serve on the Atlanta Public School Board?

I want to serve on the Atlanta Public School Board because education has had a profound impact on my life and has allowed me to live a lifestyle that I never dreamed of when growing up on a farm in Halifax County, Virginia. I know education is the key to America's economic vitality and public education is the greatest resource our country has for its citizens. In my opinion, public education is the greatest resource we have in America to lift people out of poverty and set them on the path to accomplishing the American Dream. I recognize Atlanta's children need and deserve a strong advocate who is determined to provide quality education. Their future, the future of city and state, and our country depends upon the quality of public education.

I am running for the Atlanta Board of Education because I believe that Atlanta's economic future is at stake. We can not afford to cheat Atlanta's children out of a quality education. Failing to educate children in Atlanta only leads to increased crime, high health care costs, high unemployment, low wages and a continued cycle of hardship and poverty. I want to serve Atlanta Public Schools to assure parents their children are safe and receiving a quality education. I want to insure teachers are provided the appropriate tools and resources for classroom instruction that promote high academic achievement for every student.

#### 2. What do you see as the roles and responsibilities of a school board member?

I see the role and responsibilities of a school board member is 1) governance, 2) hiring a competent Superintendent and 3) setting policies and budget priorities. A board member is charged with developing policies, programs, and procedures that promote academic achievement and it is that member's responsibility to communicate to parents, citizens and stakeholders honestly about school system performance. Also, a successful school board member by able to craft a vision and build consensus with fellow board members to achieve that vision.

A school board member is further charged with (1) assessing the school system's strengths; (2) considering any compelling problems or emerging issues; (3) studying trends, opportunities, and anticipated challenges; (4) developing and reviewing goals; (5) reflecting on its educational performance and leadership philosophy; and (6) conducting self-assessment of the board's activities and operations. However, a school board member's most important responsibility is oversight and fiduciary accountability.

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### **3. What changes, if any, should be made to the code of ethics? Please explain.**

Understanding that it is not the board members responsibility to manage schools, I don't think the code of ethics should bar board members from visiting schools. I believe the board of ethics should be appointed by outside stakeholders and not board members who may be the subject of investigations. It is a precarious position to put one in to make decisions that may adversely impact the person who appointed you to serve.

I believe have a strict code of ethics is important and board members should have routine training or refreshers to ensure each member fully understand his/her responsibilities and can conduct themselves accordingly.

### **4. What would you contribute to the budget/fiscal management of APS?**

I will contribute my experience in not-for-profit management and real estate project development to the budget/fiscal management of Atlanta Public Schools. My daily work as a grant writer and not-for-profit management consultant has and continues to focus on creating real estate development projects within underserved communities using public financing tools. I have worked with for-profit and not-for-profit developers to create rental and owner-occupied units by using LIHTC, CDBG, HOME and ADA Bond financing. I am proud of my approach in combining market discipline with social awareness to create more than 500 units of affordable housing in the City of Atlanta.

My experience enables me to not only be comfortable with financial statements and reports, but also to know what questions to ask in connection with sources and use of funds. This type of engagement and oversight is essential to the Atlanta Board of Education fulfilling its obligations under the charter, to students, faculty and staff, and the citizens of Atlanta.

### **5. As a school board member, what would you do to address/improve student achievement?**

I believe the key issue that needs to be addressed is the quality of teachers. APS must attract and retain high quality teachers and provide them with appropriate classroom management training in order for them to succeed. Teacher quality is the #1 key to improving student academic performance. Another issue of concern that must be addressed is the achievement gap between minority and majority students. Educational parity is a major issue for Atlanta and the state of Georgia's economy which impacts everyone's quality of life. We need to develop new strategies to address academic disparities by working with leading not-for-profit groups to provide economic and non-economic resources and provide our teachers with training on to reach high need students. Quality teachers and parental involvement are the cornerstones of closing the achievement gap.

Therefore, I will work to provide teachers with the training, tools and resources appropriate for classroom instruction, increase high-need parental involvement, work with outside groups to provide sustainable means of supporting for low-income families, and support efforts that increase the number of work ready students.

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### **6. What do you see as the three most important issues facing the Atlanta Public Schools and how would you address these issues?**

The three most important issues facing the Atlanta Public Schools are: 1) Graduation Rates; 2) Parent Involvement and 3) School Safety. Improving the graduation rate of Atlanta Public Schools is critical to the health of our local economy. The cost of 2000 drop outs manifests as a \$100,000,000 loss to our economy and contributes to high crime, incarceration, unemployment and poverty rates as well as poor health. To address this issue, we must begin to engage students in experiential learning activities that develop work ready skills in automobile repair and mechanics, plumbing, heating and air, etc. Entrepreneurial training must also be available to students in Atlanta Public Schools.

Parent involvement is critical to improving our schools and the district. I plan to enhance parent involvement in Atlanta Public Schools and the district by providing regular electronic, telephonic, and in-person information to parents. I plan to engage parents that are not involved by leveraging my community contacts to reach those parents whose voices are not in the conversation. I would like to see the concept of "Parent University" implemented in Atlanta Public Schools. Parent Universities can be useful to communities at large by providing adult education (GED), workforce development activities, parenting skills training that are critical for parent success in aiding their child to achieve higher academic results.

Safety for our children is one of the biggest concerns parents have spoken with me about over the past few months. The route to school may not have sidewalks, or may be riddled with abandoned buildings, graffiti and over grown vacant lots. I will work with Council members from District 3 & 4 to create collaborative opportunities to ensure students have a safe path to school. Partnering with the City will enable us to bring the City resources (sidewalks, code enforcement, etc.) to help ensure students have a safe path to school. The school itself may also be in disrepair, which is why I strongly support the renewal of the education SPLOST 4.

### **7. If you are elected to represent District 2 on the APS Board, how would you balance the needs of your specific constituents with the needs of the overall school district?**

I will work to create policies that are fair and balanced and can be applied consistently across the district. When setting budget priorities, I will work to ensure resources are available in every classroom to ensure the highest achievement of our students. I believe doing what is in the best interest of the entire system will meet the needs of my constituents in District 2.

I will focus on thoroughly understanding the issues and effectively communicating the board's decision on those issues to constituents and stakeholders. This approach coupled with the continuous engagement of constituents and stakeholders via in-person meetings, regular telephonic and electronic communications, and other written communications increases public engagement and understanding.

### **8. As a school board member, what are the factors on which you would base decisions?**

As a school board member, I would base decisions on the following factors: 1) does this activity or policy promote academic achievement; 2) what impact does the activity or policy have on the budget; 3)

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community engagement; and 4) the fiscal impact on the constituents. The best interests of the Atlanta Public Schools and increasing academic achievement will be at the forefront of my decision making process

First and foremost, academic achievement of our students must be our #1 priority. I will work collaboratively with my colleagues and the Superintendent to ensure we attract and retain quality teachers, provide them with appropriate classroom management training and insure teachers have the necessary tools, technology and classroom resources to promote academic success. Every policy or activity will be measured against its costs and potential gains to the system.

Next, I will seek to understand what my colleagues and the Superintendent have done to engage the community (i.e., parents, public stakeholders, and private stakeholders). Community engagement is a fundamental element of our democratic process and key to our elected form of government. The more we are able to engage constituents and stakeholders the more constituents and stakeholders understand and appreciate the complex issues that our school board faces.

Finally, the fiscal impact on constituents will be a factor in my decision making because we are using taxpayer funds to operate our schools. I will focus on understanding the available sources and proposed uses of funds to deliver both return on taxpayer funds and ensure that we are meeting our educational goals within our schools. My business and management background inform my analysis in this area.

### **9. What is your vision for APS? What would you like to accomplish in your four-year term as an Atlanta School Board member?**

As the next member of the Atlanta Board of Education's District 2 seat, first and foremost, I want to assure parents that their children are safe and receiving a quality education. I want to ensure that teachers are provided with the appropriate tools and resources for classroom instruction that promote high academic achievement for every student. Secondly, I would like to negotiate a new charter forward for APS that restores a balance of power between the board and the superintendent.

Finally, my pie in the sky dream would be to create a vocational academy that insured we graduate students work ready with skills such as auto mechanics, auto body, printing, electricians, plumbers, and other trades that allow them to immediately become employed and possibly employ others in the future. If I can accomplish these three things, I will have given my best service to Atlanta.

### **10. Against what metrics would you assess district leadership's attainment of key goals? How would you know when a program or decision has been successful?**

I would assess district leadership attainment of key goals by both standardized testing metrics and other academic and vocational performance metrics. While I understand that standardized testing benchmarks are necessary and commonplace, I support what State School Superintendent Dr. John Barge articulates as the college and career ready performance index.

Use of the college and career ready performance index would take into account not just standardized test scores but other factors such as: reading levels in elementary schools and middle schools; student

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success in career technical classes; student scores on ACT and SAT college entrance exams; student performance on Advanced Placement tests; student participation in community service projects with a measurable learning outcome

This type of innovation focuses on a variety of metrics which is more representative of a student's ability than the results of one test on one day. I would know when the college and career ready performance index is successful by monitoring attendance and evaluating graduation rates to determine if both attendance and graduation rates increased. Such an increase could be correlated to increased student involvement and a greater focus on learning. Another measure might be drawn from the business community's ability to fill job vacancies with local talent.

**11. What information do you have about the Atlanta Public School System, and specifically, District 2? What does this information tell you about what should happen in the school system?**

There are 18 schools located within the boundaries of District 2. 75% of schools within the district were cited in the CRCT Cheating Scandal and only half the schools met AYP. District 2 has 5 charter schools, all but one made AYP and only one school was implicated in possible cheating. Student enrollment is down significantly in the two high schools within the District.

This information tells me there is something working in the public charter school model. We must investigate this more closely; identify what is working well and find ways to implement those best practices throughout the district. Low enrollment suggests parents may have low confidence in the system and may have moved their child to other districts in hopes of finding higher quality educational opportunities.

Teachers in the district must be provided with classroom management training so they can spend less time gaining control of the class room and more time on academic instruction. Additionally, high stakes testing tied to rewards may not be the best way to incentivize teachers to produce the highest academic results for students.

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**(Response should be completed above this line)**