

Danielle Monroe

1. How will you empower educators to develop flexible environments that recognize that learning happens in different places, at different times, and in different ways, inside and outside of school? (2-minute response)

In the classrooms, this looks very different at the elementary level than it does for our oldest, High School students, and we need to celebrate the things we are already doing well in those areas. Elementary school children are offered a variety of movement and seating options for work times which acknowledges that students are individuals with different learning needs and a flexible environment increases success among diverse learners.

The district is already teaching math in a very different way than when I was a student, kids are taught multiple strategies to solve problems and the emphasis is more on the process of solving rather than the answer. Not every strategy works for every child, so teaching many possibilities increases the odds that every child will find a way to be successful.

At the High School level, I see that students are encouraged to make connections to learning opportunities outside of the school building, in our community, acknowledging that we are all learners regardless of whether we are enrolled in school or engaging in our lives.

Clearly, teachers are already doing these things successfully and are embracing the whole child. Empowerment to continue and expand these practices should include administrators, curriculum developers, and families. Meaningful professional development that connects to educator and student needs is important, and so is making curriculum choices that are aligned with the goal.

2. What do you think the schools are doing right to prepare students for a successful future? Likewise, what do you think could be improved upon and how would you make that happen? (3-minute response)

I think we have a lot to celebrate when considering Bethel Public Schools, and the fact that our enrollment continues to increase while many other communities are seeing declines certainly supports that notion. As a community we didn't always value our schools and it wasn't too long ago that our High School was on probation as a result. But now, in 2019, we have a school with an amazing Pathways program connecting students with real jobs. We have a flourishing ROTC program with high enrollment and impressive outcomes for participants. The course selection at the HS is flexible enough to meet the needs of students at different levels and encourages individuality with engaging STEAM offerings. Connections with our fantastic local trade schools like Abbott Tech, are another thing to celebrate, we know that there are many paths students can take after HS and many ways to build a successful future. These are just some of the things I feel we are doing a great job at in Bethel.

One area I think we can improve on is Social Emotional learning, and I plan to elaborate on that a little later. Another area I think we need to focus on is strengthening Special Education Supports, and finally, we can't ignore that our population is diversifying so our

teaching practices, supports and structures will need to be continuously evaluated to accommodate our changing population.

3. What do you think are the most important ways we can keep our kids safe in school? How do you balance keeping kids safe with making sure that they are not afraid? (3- minute response)

Physical safety is the priority and should remain so, I'm thrilled that we are upgrading two of our buildings and will be able to enhance the security of those structures. BPS has taken advantage of programs thought the state of CT to improve the physical safety of our schools already and I believe continuing to be aware of the what is available, and keeping abreast of creative funding sources for those changes should be our primary focus. I think resource officers in the schools are another great addition since Sandy Hook and through my own children's experiences it's clear to me that the officers selected for those positions are doing a great job of making positive connections with students. Both of these measures enhance the safety of kids while being either invisible to students, or a positive enhancement rather than an anxiety provoking addition.

Staff training is the next level of security and training around drills needs to encourage flexible thinking and needs to empower educators to handle many different scenarios. The current model BPS is using does reflect this and should continue to be monitored and adjusted. It's terrible and heartbreaking to me that schools need to spend time and resources to address these concerns, but it's apparent that they do and educators are on the front lines of this despite the fact that few if any of them went into this profession out of a sense of wanting to protect children from this kind of horror. That said, educators need to know how to respond and above all need to establish relationships with students that foster trust. In the event of a true emergency, of any kind, the adults need to be ready to lead and students need to be ready to follow trusted adults.

The more complex part of the equation is student involvement with their own safety and this is a delicate balance that I believe is something we need to be very thoughtful about. We have students in our schools that range from preschoolers to pre-adults and the expectations for student involvement in their personal safety needs to reflect the developmental differences of that broad spectrum. Students should hold the least amount of responsibility in this equation, and I believe our youngest learners should be insulated from frightening information. Kids want to place their trust in adults they know will take care of them, and instinctually look to us for guidance.

Possibly the most challenging piece to this problem is identifying students who are a danger to themselves and/or others, and following through with effective supports for those children and their families. For this reason, I believe we need to prioritize mental health in our schools. We need sufficient staff to support students and those staff need enough flexibility to form meaningful connections with kids. Staff also need to be trained to identify and respond to kids in crisis. I believe BPS should consider forming an exploratory committee to review universal mental health screeners and consider whether this is something the district would benefit from.

4. How will you ensure schools cultivate engaged and informed citizens, ready to work together across difference and actively participate in our democracy? (2-minute response)

At the core of a successfully functioning democracy are citizens who respect and value diversity. With that in mind, an area I feel we could improve upon in Bethel is social emotional education. I'm fortunate to work in a district that is leading the way on this and I would love to see Bethel forging this path as well. It's challenging to shift emphasis from reactive approaches to proactive approaches because time and resources are always limited. I don't want to imply that Bethel lacks proactive approaches, but rather that I'd like to see those increased. I would like to see Bethel incorporate a social emotional curriculum as a part of this effort, the benefits of that approach speak directly to the needs in this question.

- S/E learning fosters respectful classroom and school communities that support differences and celebrate diversity
- Students are more engaged and ready to learn when they know they are a part of a community that values what each individual offers
- Discipline problems decrease in schools where S/E learning is a priority.

Schools are places where students learn far more than academics, these buildings are where they learn to work with peers, solve problems, and value themselves and others. They learn that they are members of a community where they have needs and so do those around them, and that functioning communities take everyone into account. When people respect and value differences in others we all benefit.

5. If you were to send a newsletter to every Bethel household, around what three issues would you focus your update? (30-second response)

As a member of the BoE it would not be appropriate for me to send a personal newsletter to households, the BoE is a unit that should work together and should share a common message. If the BoE were to share such a newsletter I think families would want information on the progress of the renovations, progress towards yearly district goals, and issues that relate to the school budget.

6. What are your qualifications for running for the Board of Education? (30-second response)

- I have been a BPS parent for 10 years and have had personal experience with all but one of our schools
- Experience as a substitute teacher in a different district
- Experience as an informal educator teaching marine biology at an aquarium as well as designing programs, training and evaluating staff, working on a team, and working across many departments
- I hold an undergraduate degree in Psychology and received my Masters Degree in School counseling
- This is my 7th year working as an Elementary School Counselor in a nearby district where I also work on a team designing and implementing curriculum and serve on several committees
- I've been trained in Restorative Practices, I'm a School Climate Trainer and also participated in RULER training at Yale University

7. Numerous rankings are published each year comparing our schools against others in the region and state. There are a number of factors that go into these rankings. What would you prioritize in order to improve our rankings? (1-minute response)

I think there are a lot of things Bethel is already doing really well but an area that we need to keep an eye on is our Equity Rating. This measures a variety of things, but to sum it up, it's a measure of disparity between disadvantaged students and their peers. This is a problem for all of Connecticut and it definitely has relevance to us here in Bethel. Our schools have an increasingly diverse student body across many categories including socio-economics and we need to ensure that outcomes for all students are high.

8. What role, if any, do you think students should have in the political process? (1-minute response)

I learned yesterday that some students at the Middle School are circulating a petition right now to have the day after Halloween off from school, and while we all know that effort would take more than a petition, I loved that they are taking up a cause that's important to them and trying to impact change. As a parent, I have made it a priority to educate my children about politics at a local as well as a broader level. I've brought them with me to my polling place frequently, answered their questions and had great discussions over the years. I know these discussions happen within the schools as well and am also pleased that there are student government opportunities so that practical learning opportunities are available. I strongly believe that communities benefit from educated and involved citizenry and I believe that both home and school have a part to play. I'd love to see our students learning more about our local form of town government, and I know that resources already exist that can be used for that. Kids are members of our community too and their voices matter. The better educated they are, the more we all benefit.

9. Looking forward, what do you think are the biggest issues on the horizon over the next 5 to 10 years and what would you do to address them? (2-minute response)

That's a really BIG question to fit into a small response window. Two of the biggest challenges I see on the horizon are issues we are already grappling with:

1. How we manage the increasing price tag for providing a high quality and accessible educating for all students, and specifically for Special Education and ELL
2. How curriculum demands are impacting students from a social emotional level, from a college or post HS level, and from a career readiness level.

Addressing both issues is going to have to extend out of the boundaries of our town since these two issues are rooted in State and National mandates. We will need a board that is well versed on both issues, who are ready to advocate for our town needs and can do so in a clear and effective manner, and who can work with our elected representatives (local, state and national levels) to effect change.

Additionally, we need board members who are willing to work together and with Administration to create and implement creative solutions.

10. With increasing school enrollments, what additional measures beyond current practices would you implement to validate residency requirements? (1-minute response)

We have a strong process already in place, I've experienced myself how challenging it can be to provide appropriate documentation since one of my children left the district for 18 months and then returned to BPS. Despite the fact that his younger brother remained in the district I still had to re-prove residency to re-enroll my son. I know that there will always be people who are motivated to circumvent rules, it's an issue that all desirable districts face. If you review our data in Bethel, the number of families who are breaking the law in this regard is low and we do have a strong system in place to investigate suspected issue and authenticate residency. Perhaps there is some benefit to asking families to re-authenticate as their children move from one school to the next, like from the Middle School to the High School, but we do need to consider the cost/benefit to that for everyone. This would require a lot of staff time to process paperwork every year, and it would also likely be very poorly received by the Bethel community as it will require families to gather and present valid documents up to 5 times per child as their kids move through our schools. It's a subject worthy of a discussion, but a cost analysis is needed.

11. As more families move into our great town we are facing two significant challenges: 1) larger class sizes 2) increased expenses for support services needed for our growing ESL and special needs populations. Supporting this growth adequately (including hiring the needed teachers & support staff) can only be accomplished with an increased budget. Will you support this need this spring when budget season comes along? (2- minute response)

Ultimately, this isn't a choice. Bethel, like all public-school districts, is required to provide services for ELL and Special Education students. There is no ability to ignore these requirements, it would be unlawful and ultimately far costlier to attempt to avoid providing these services. Beyond the legal issues, it's also a question of morality and who we are as a town, as citizens, and as human beings. So yes, of course as a member of the BoE I would support following our legal and moral obligations to provide a free and appropriate education to all the learners in our community.

A more complex question is: how do we do this? As a Bethel parent I've been impressed with and appreciative of the creative ways Dr. Carver and the BoE have found to save money. We will need to continue to think outside the box, consider new ways of doing things, look to share services with neighboring districts, and retain staff who can demonstrate skills in this area. It's important to remember that while difficult choices often need to be made in order to keep costs down, cutting in the wrong places ultimately costs us far more. We are fortunate to have a strong Superintendent at our helm leading these kinds of decisions, not every district is as fortunate. As a BoE member I will support creative cost reducing measures that maintain the high level of academic success we have developed in Bethel, and I hope I can bring some fresh ideas to the table as well.

Addendum: 10/18/19 12.

Recent research has suggested later school start times may change student achievement outcomes. This topic is currently being investigated in our own school district. One BHS Civics student asks, "What is your opinion of school start times?" (1- minute response)

My opinion is that balancing the needs of students and the needs of the community is not an easy task. Research indicates that later start times for HS students improve their learning outcomes, and of course, I support that. However, the needs of the community are also factors we need to weigh. Dr. Carver, the current BoE and a school start times committee explored options and the results were just sent out along with an explanation of the factors that were considered in crafting a proposal. At this point it's the community's turn to weigh in, and once that information is gathered we'll see where we land.