



Responses to Board of Education Candidate Forum Questions Provided by Allison Stowell, Democratic BOE Candidate

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)

Bethel is blessed with incredible teachers that take pride in knowing how to connect with children, stay up to date with innovative teaching methods, and most importantly understand that if there ever was a one-size-for all approach to education that it definitely has no place in educating our next generation of thinkers and leaders. That said, I also think that it's important to recognize that in today's classroom addressing the nuanced and unique needs of our students is critically important. It's important to give students opportunities to work collaboratively, independently and interdependently, as well as to offer personalized learning opportunities and to acknowledge that kids learn at different rates and in different ways.

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)

Some of the things we are doing right include addressing social emotional aspects across all grade levels and striving to incorporate more on developing mental health awareness, though I recognize this is something we need to continue to focus on and improve. We have incredible programs at BHS like NJROTC and our growing pathways program, which provides unique learning opportunities and reminds our students that education and life after high school can be approached in different ways. I believe however, that we can be doing more to provide higher level enrichment at Johnson and BMS. Along the same lines, while we offer many advanced placement classes, I think we can continue to offer more internships and "real-world" opportunities outside of the classroom. Finally, I love that as a district we are celebrating the arts, sports and other activities that build a well-rounded student, while also embracing a variety of clubs and encouraging our students to engage in social causes and treat each other with respect and kindness. I know that as a district we need to continue this path, and I think that's very important.

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)

As it relates to keeping kids safe in school, we need to invest in additional security measures through the use of technology and additional safety protocols. Balancing safety and preparedness, while keeping kids less afraid is an equally important and essential consideration.

We grew up with fire drills and with conversation about what to if...today our children are forced to add to that list. There are many ways we can approach lock down drills and the like so that kids view this too as something that they are doing "just in case" vs "for the day when", which would no doubt lead to increased anxiety about this very challenging topic. It's most important that we recognize that not all kids are ready to manage the anxiety associated with school safety the same way and that any messaging must be tailored for children who may find it even more frightening than their peers.

Lastly, related to this topic is ensuring that all students feel connected to adults in our school, that they feel safe, and that they have at least one educator they can reach out to and confide in when they aren't feeling safe at school, or frankly anywhere.

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)

We can't be afraid to introduce kids to an array of topics or as my 13-year-old would say we shouldn't "shut the news off when kids walk in the room". Kids need dialogue and exposure- for our youngest students this may be a chance to use technology to see how their peers on another continent are learning. Albeit facilitated by knowledgeable and supportive staff that can ensure that there are rich learning opportunities that are well structured. For our older students it means not being afraid to let them learn and form opinions. Naturally, all students need to learn the power of their voice and the role they can/will play in society and how to have respect for others regardless of their background and personal experience.

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

We're living in a time of information overload and keeping it all straight can be difficult sometimes even with our various communication methods. Hopefully we all read Dr. Carver's helpful weekly newsletter. That said, for the purpose of this question (since I don't think that a BOE member should be sending a newsletter to the community, especially one from a single board member) I would include the following three issues in a newsletter:

- 1) bullet points with important upcoming dates/links to register for programs on those dates if needed (because we all need the reminder!)
- 2) a "proud moment" that BPS should celebrate that week and greatest challenge facing our district
- 3) "did you know" resource to highlight one of the many incredible school or community-based resources that are offered to our families that we may not know about

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

I just recently stepped down after four years on the board of directors for the Bethel Education Foundation. Through my work with BEF I supported our district's primary purpose to improve student achievement and helped our district keep up with next generation learning. I also learned about the challenges we face as a district and decided it was time to be a bigger part of the solution in developing policies to meet those challenges. Additionally, I launched my nutrition company, Stowell Nutrition, in 2003. I know well how important it is to work collaboratively and understand the importance of listening to different viewpoints to achieve successful outcomes. Finally, with two kids in our district, I am immensely invested in seeing our district grow, thrive and ultimately doing what's best for Bethel children to ensure they have a successful future.

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'm not sure we are measuring the right things in education when it comes to student outcomes. We need to develop and seek out a new set of metrics that illustrate what it means to be a successful Bethel student. We should measure what we value as a community not what someone outside of our community tells us is important.

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

I was so happy to see that we received a question from our high school civics class. When it comes to best serving the needs of our kids, we may be best served by hearing from the kids themselves. Let's hear from last year's graduates, do they feel like we provided them the foundation they needed to be successful? What about our middle schoolers, what are their most important concerns? There is no doubt that including our students in the political process can not only benefit us, but also make them feel included, engaged and that their voice matters.

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)

I hear people are moving out of CT. Maybe this is generally true, but they are moving into Bethel. Our biggest challenge over the next 5-10 years is going to be supporting this growth with the additional staff we need to avoid over-sized

classes and a lack of robust and varied courses of study. The other costly challenge will be ensuring we are offering a next generation education that offers the high tech skills students need to enter today's work force, that we are exposing our children to the most innovative learning methods and that our infrastructure is prepared to support that learning as well. Today's job market is seeking problem solvers and innovative thinkers. Our mission statement, which includes fostering "a culture of excellence and achievement accomplished by challenging curricula, committed teaching and optimized learning opportunities for all students," can only be met when we keep up with the social, emotional and educational needs of our students and staff.

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

From attending town meetings and learning about this important topic I'm aware that it's something our district takes very seriously. Our administration works with local authorities and a private investigator to explore potential cases of using invalid addresses or other fraudulent practices. I want to note that if we are unaware of these investigations and when these cases are being examined it's intentional. I also want to emphasize that while this is a very important topic and something that all towns manage, it's not a huge problem for Bethel and that very few cases of fraud have been found over the past several years.

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)

They say you can see a districts core values by looking at their budget. If we really value top notch education, we should support it. It's critical that we support our schools and acknowledge that inadequate budgets come with unintended consequences. No candidate for BOE would support increasing the budget without using common sense and considering how best to use finances. That said, we are increasing in size and not increasing our number of educators. This is unsustainable. Within the next few years we will have two beautiful new buildings- a physical example of the top-notch district we are. Growing and being attractive to new families- especially in such a competitive county is a GREAT thing! It means our kids are benefitting, our town will thrive, and our property values will increase. However, there are costs that come with growing and most importantly there are costs that come with retaining the incredible professionals that work in our district. We have talented and devoted teachers and staff- this I know well from my time on BEF and of course as a mom in our district- let's reward their passion with classrooms and supplies that enable them to do their job most effectively and at the same time find ways to be creative in how we maximize our funds and seek new revenue opportunities.

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 time)

I'm so happy to see this question from an engaged student! We know that early start times and the chronic fatigue that can result from lack of sleep is associated with several negative outcomes, which include impacts to wellbeing and physical and mental health. Unfortunately, we also know there are limitations to what we can do as a district- not just financial but also to ensure that our students can engage in sports and other after school activities with other schools in CT. As per Dr. Carver's recent email, we have found the start time that works for our district in 2020.

However, if Connecticut should pass a law like California has, which makes later start times mandatory (and hopefully then fund the mandate), we can possibly achieve an even later time. As a trustee, I would work with this board and other boards of education in the region to call on our state education department to consider and study this initiative.