

GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Voter Guide: Q&A with the 4 candidates seeking the 4 seats on the Charlottesville City School Board

 by CHARLOTTESVILLE TOMORROW
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In Virginia, county school boards are composed of at-large members, and one member from each district. They are elected for four-year terms and serve as the leaders of the district, ensuring effective schooling and setting the direction of public schools. For the [Charlottesville City School Board](#), because there are no districts, the seven members are all at large, meaning they are elected by all voters in the city.

Sitting School Board members James Bryant, LaShundra Morsberger, Sherry Kraft and Jennifer McKeever are not seeking reelection. And there are just four certified candidates vying for the positions: Chris Meyer, Nicole Richardson, Amanda Burns and Shymora Cooper. All four candidates would be new to their roles. That makes this race uncontested.

Charlottesville Tomorrow designed a questionnaire based on more than 200 responses we received to a voter survey. The candidates' answers appear in the order they were received.

Join Charlottesville Tomorrow, Charlottesville United for Public Education, In My Humble Opinion and Vinegar Hill Magazine Oct. 18 for a conversation with all four candidates. [Click for more information.](#)

Like many school districts, Charlottesville City Schools is struggling to hire and retain teachers. How would you, as a school board member, propose addressing this issue?

Chris Meyer: First, I think we're doing better than most, and while I'm not excited about any classroom without a permanent teacher, I don't think we need to do a wholesale remake of our employment strategy. Having done a lot of hiring in the past, I know that total compensation, which to me includes not only salary, but the whole benefit package, needs to be interesting enough to folks to either join the profession or come to CCS from another district. For tough-to-fill positions, such as some of the specialist roles, bus drivers, and STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] teachers, more compensation is probably needed. Finally, I do think there are other non-compensation factors such as thinking about how to give back more control to teachers about what is taught in the classroom instead of the SOL [the statewide Standards of Learning] testing focused curriculums.

Nicole Richardson: The pandemic has left a lot of organizations, including public schools, facing challenges hiring and retaining staff. As a school board member, I would support the district administration in streamlining the hiring processes by creating an engagement survey that will focus on staff retention.

Amanda Burns: We must acknowledge the significant workload our current staff is handling. Addressing their concerns promptly and providing both peer and administrative support without the fear of retaliation is essential. It's crucial to establish ongoing, open, and honest dialogue with the Charlottesville Education Association [the teacher and school support staff union] regarding working conditions and expectations. We should place trust in our educators and empower them to fulfill their roles effectively. Additionally, offering resources and opportunities for continuing education and daily planning with protected classroom coverage can prevent educators from having to make difficult trade offs between personal time and professional development.

I also support the idea of increasing the compensation for our educators and teaching assistants. This can be achieved by collaborating with legislative leaders to secure sufficient state funding without burdening the local community with additional taxes. Moreover, I propose offering referral bonuses, salary incentives and housing assistance to attract and retain quality educators. I am also in favor of classroom coverage and additional compensation for educators attending college career fairs and recruitment events, not only within Virginia but across the nation with an emphasis on virtual, social media driven job fairs with targeted teaching candidates via LinkedIn and Instagram. It would also be valuable to have administrators, parents, students, and community stakeholders participate in these events, to provide a genuine representation of the CCS community. I also endorse mentorship programs like a teacher residency, where individuals spend a year working and receiving a paycheck while being

mentored by a high-quality teacher, in exchange for a commitment to teach for a specified duration.

These are just a few of the strategies I would advocate for in addressing the teacher shortage, all while collaborating closely with our current human resources staff and existing infrastructure.

Cooper: As a member of the Charlottesville City Schools School Board, I suggest tackling the issue of teacher recruitment and retention by focusing on several key areas. These include offering attractive compensation packages to make our school district more competitive, investing in comprehensive professional development opportunities, providing housing support or incentives to make living in our community more affordable, promoting a healthy balance between work and personal life, involving teachers in decision-making processes, and launching targeted recruitment campaigns. Furthermore, we should prioritize diversity and inclusion when hiring new teaching staff. By creating a supportive and rewarding environment for educators, we can attract and retain high-quality teachers, which will ultimately benefit our students and the entire community.

This district is having a similar issue with bus drivers. How would you propose addressing this issue?

Meyer: If I understand things correctly, getting back control to City Schools from the city's Charlottesville Area Transit [CAT] on hiring and employing school bus drivers is in the works and is likely part of the solution. For unknown reasons, CAT hasn't been able to figure out the compensation package to attract and keep the drivers. School bus drivers should not be part-time positions, but packaged as full-time positions with proper benefits. Ensuring the proper compensation and benefit package is likely to secure City Schools the proper amount of school bus drivers.

Richardson: Pay raise. Pay our bus drivers for the work and responsibility they put out every single school day. The price of living in Charlottesville is far too high to not pay our essential workers what they deserve.

Burns: I support the idea of transferring the management of Charlottesville City Schools transportation back to the division, appointing a dedicated manager of transportation and operations as the initial first step in addressing the current shortage. Effective leadership and accountability are critical to ensuring that our transportation employees feel supported and valued, alongside competitive wages, excellent benefits and sufficient working hours. Student pupil transportation is a fundamental responsibility of the district, and it is imperative that we uphold accountability for this essential service.

Cooper: To address the shortage of bus drivers in our district, I would propose a multifaceted approach, including competitive compensation packages, targeted recruitment efforts with local partnerships,

comprehensive training programs, flexible scheduling options, and retention incentives. Additionally, improving the work environment through safety measures and support networks, engaging the community in fostering appreciation for bus drivers, and streamlining administrative processes may help attract and retain qualified drivers. By implementing these measures, we can ensure the safe and efficient transportation of our students while addressing the bus driver shortage.

Tell us about the achievement gaps present in your district. What sort of programs and approaches do you favor taking to close those gaps?

Meyer: There are achievement gaps between a lot of different demographics. Multiple solutions are likely needed as each student and demographic is different. First, I would reinforce early and active engagement with parents to make them aware of where a student may be falling behind to encourage support and engagement from home. Secondly, I would like the board and community to entertain an extended school year to reduce time away from school in which students are not exercising their brain the same way and forgetting their previous year's lessons. Finally, from discussions I have had with teachers, it appears we should further investigate the benefits of project-based learning vis-a-vis the more traditional lecture style class, as it has shown to improve learning outcomes by making topics more interesting and thus increasing engagement and content retention.

Richardson: Charlottesville City schools are an interconnected, equity-focused school community. Eighty six percent of Charlottesville students in grades 3-11 are identified as gifted. [Editor's note: This is the headline of a [2021 report in the Daily Progress](#), and the percentage was given by the program coordinator.] I favor the Gifted programs' new model where "all students participate in the high-quality experience [of gifted education] on a regular basis." I believe this program helps bridge a gap in our district.

Burns: In our district, we face notable achievement gaps, primarily affecting students from marginalized backgrounds and those with socioeconomic challenges. To address these gaps, I will advocate for a multifaceted approach: early childhood education access, targeted tutoring and small group instruction, diverse curriculum and culturally relevant education, teacher professional development, and community and family engagement.

Cooper: In our district, achievement gaps persist as stark reminders of the systemic inequities deeply rooted in our educational landscape. These gaps disproportionately affect students from marginalized racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. To combat this issue effectively, a multifaceted approach is essential.

Early childhood learning programs serve as the foundation for addressing these disparities, equipping

children from all backgrounds with essential skills before they enter formal education. Comprehensive after-school programs should extend beyond homework assistance, offering enrichment activities that foster creativity and holistic development, ensuring all students have access. Saturday School can provide targeted academic support to struggling students, particularly those facing challenges at home, while also incorporating mentorship and enrichment opportunities. Supporting the whole family through initiatives like parenting workshops and family support services recognizes that a child's success is closely tied to their family's well-being.

Equity and anti-bias education are crucial components, as they create inclusive learning environments where every student feels valued, regardless of their background. Teacher training and resources should prioritize culturally responsive teaching methods to address diverse learning needs effectively. Data-driven decision-making and community partnerships strengthen accountability and provide additional support networks. By implementing these measures, we can address achievement gaps comprehensively, fostering a more equitable and inclusive educational system where all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally.

There's been an increase in violence, particularly gun violence, within the City of Charlottesville. What should the district do to keep students safe and supported in school?

Meyer: First, we need to ensure our schools are fully staffed with mental health professionals able to assist students in dealing with trauma, stress and violent incidents. This might include extra financial resources to “top up” the salaries Region Ten [the [local community services board](#)] offers and/or to hire those counselors directly as CCS staff. Additionally, I'd like to see City Schools add more after school sports and extracurricular activities, either in partnership with traditional partners, such as the Boys and Girls Club, or administered by the school system itself. I think providing more after school structure and interesting opportunities will serve as part of the solution to addressing some of the youth violence.

Richardson: I think we should focus on building trust to be successful when facing challenges. We need to create a comprehensive school safety plan. I know some measures like upgraded camera surveillance or increased law enforcement may have mixed effects on our students. I'm sure we could come up with an inclusive solution.

Burns: To address the rise in violence, particularly gun violence, in Charlottesville, I support safety initiatives such as increased community partnerships for student and staff support, expanded counseling services, and extensive community outreach to ensure school safety and student well-being.

Cooper: As a means of supporting students who have experienced hardship, I suggest advocating for

crisis counseling services that offer access to school counselors, social workers and psychologists. These professionals can provide prompt assistance to those dealing with the aftermath of violence and trauma. The emphasis should be on promoting conflict resolution, anger management and trauma recovery, while also working to engage and involve the community through outreach efforts. Partnering with organizations that specialize in trauma-informed care would be beneficial in addressing the emotional and psychological needs of students. Also encouraging parents to attend meetings and participate in workshops and support their children through difficult times.

Youngkin recently released updated model policies that define how school officials should treat transgender or gender nonconforming students – for example requiring teachers to have parental consent before calling students by names or pronouns that are not on official records. Do you support adopting this policy?

Meyer: I don't think it is a good policy and from what I've read, it likely conflicts with federal and other state policies. We should work with our legal counsel to make sure we're respecting all of our students' civil and human rights while engaging with any parent that has a concern about their child.

Richardson: Navigating change for many can be a challenge. I trust Youngkin's updated policies are in the best interest of our school system and student's well-being.

Burns: I do not. I firmly support the policy adopted by Charlottesville City Schools on September 1, 2022, "Treatment of Transgender and Non-Binary Students."

Cooper: No, I do not agree with Youngkin's administration. As the mother of a transgender child, I feel strongly about supporting LGBTQ+ students. It is crucial to create a welcoming and inclusive educational environment by implementing anti-discrimination policies, providing safe spaces, offering an inclusive curriculum, counseling, and mental health services, and establishing student clubs and support groups. The key to supporting LGBTQ+ students is to foster an environment that recognizes and respects their identities. It is essential to collaborate with stakeholders to ensure that every student has equal opportunities to thrive and succeed in their education.

This area has seen a steady increase in migrant, refugee and immigrant populations over the past years. Do you support helping these students get up to speed? How?

Meyer: My son's elementary school saw the amount of ESL (English as a Second Language) and immigrant students increase from about 5% to more than 20% in about two years without the respective increase of ESL staff necessary — somewhat caused by positions not allocated, yet mainly due to the inability to find candidates to fill the positions (or make the compensation financially interesting). The

proper ratio of employed ESL teachers per immigrant student and other specialized reading and social services need to be increased to reflect the higher number of ESL students. This will likely require additional financial assistance to attract and keep staff in the short-medium term, but will benefit City Schools, the City, and society by ensuring these immigrant children can enter the workforce and be successful.

Richardson: I support all students receiving help to increase educational productivity regardless of immigration status.

Burns: I am delighted to witness the continuous evolution of cultural diversity within our city over the past few years. I firmly believe that the presence of students and families from various backgrounds and experiences enriches our community and provides our children with a deeper understanding of the world beyond Charlottesville. I wholeheartedly support initiatives aimed at nurturing this growth and creating opportunities for our English Language Learners. These initiatives may include in-classroom support, small-group collaboration with peers, sheltered content instruction, and consistent, ongoing monitoring and assistance.

Cooper: In response to the increase in migrant, refugee, and immigrant populations in our country, I'm committed to supporting these students in their educational journey. I would support comprehensive efforts, including dedicated English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, cultural sensitivity training for educators, and collaboration with local community organizations to provide language and cultural support. Furthermore, I would actively work on expanding access to resources, fostering community engagement, and continually evaluating and refining our initiatives to ensure that these students have every opportunity to thrive and integrate successfully with their peers.

Are there any other important issues facing the school district that you'd like voters to know about?

Meyer: We still have significant school infrastructure needs, from adding solar panels to roofs to reduce energy bills (more money for staff!), to remodeling Walker Upper to be a proper pre-kindergarten center with wrap-around services. Additionally, with the expansion of subsidized housing (at 6th Street and Kindewood) we have more students entering the system and I prefer not to depend on the use of modular and temporary classrooms. While recent City Councils have done a great job of stepping up to the challenge regarding approving capital expenditures, we are still dealing with the impacts from decades of under-investment, which will require another \$30 to \$50 million of capital investments over the next five to 10 years. We will need the support from City residents to make these necessary investments.

Richardson: No response

Burns: Charlottesville City Schools are not immune to the complexities facing education throughout our region and much of the country. While I believe we have made great strides in some areas, there is also work to be done. While many of these issues have been addressed above, it is worth noting again that each is critical for the success and growth of the school district and deserve the attention and consideration of voters: student achievement; teacher retention and recruitment; school safety; equity and diversity; mental health and well-being; parent and community engagement; infrastructure and facilities; and adequate funding.

Cooper: It's undeniable that school funding is a crucial issue that impacts our school districts. Sufficient funding is necessary to provide quality education. One effective way to address important issues and improve the education system is to think creatively and come up with innovative ways to bring more funding to our school district. This may involve exploring funding sources that are not traditional, forming partnerships with local businesses, taking advantage of grant opportunities, and engaging the community. By taking a proactive approach, we can secure additional resources that benefit both students and educators, and significantly enhance the quality of education in our district.

More about Charlottesville City Schools

- [Meyer's history of campaign contributions from the Virginia Public Access Project](#)
- [Richardson's history of campaign contributions from the Virginia Public Access Project](#)
- [Burns' history of campaign contributions from the Virginia Public Access Project](#)
- [Cooper's history of campaign contributions from the Virginia Public Access Project](#)
- [More about the turnover of the Charlottesville City School Board in Charlottesville Tomorrow](#)
- [More about the new model for the Gifted program in a 2021 report from the Daily Progress](#)
- [Charlottesville City Schools description of the Gifted program](#)

As you get ready to vote, here are some key dates and links from the [Virginia Department of Elections](#):

Polls in Virginia close at 7 p.m. Tuesday, Nov. 7, night. The Virginia Department of Elections will publish election results in real time, as they arrive from precincts around the state. [To view them, head to this link](#). These are unofficial results until they are certified. [Here's more about how to get election results](#).

- Sept. 22: First day of in-person early voting at your [local registrar's office](#).
- Oct. 16: Deadline to [register to vote, or update an existing registration](#). You can also register after this date, and on election day, but you will vote with a provisional ballot, could take longer for officials to count because they will verify your eligibility.
- Oct. 27: Deadline to apply for a ballot to be mailed to you. Your request must be received by your local registrar by 5:00 p.m.
- Oct. 28: Voter registration offices open for early voting.
- Nov. 4: The last day of in-person early voting at your registrar.
- Nov. 7: Election Day. Here is where you can [find your polling place](#).

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