

**2026 Candidates Forum Questionnaire Coleman Bailey
Avery County Board of Education**

Core Questions About Priorities & Vision

1. Why are you running for the Avery County Board of Education? What motivates you?

I am running because I believe in the "great promise" of our students and the dedicated professionals who serve them. After 30 years as a teacher and five as an administrator, I have seen firsthand how a strong school system can transform a community. My motivation comes from the voices of former Avery County students, parents, and colleagues who have encouraged me to take this step. My family chose Avery County as our home specifically for the quality of its schools. Both of our children are proud graduates of Avery County High School. I want to ensure every family in our county feels that same confidence and connection to our educational system.

2. What experiences uniquely qualify you to serve? How will they influence policy and budgeting?

My qualification is rooted in 34 years of diverse service: from being a science teacher, director and coach to an Assistant Principal and Cabinet member Director at the Central Office Level. I have managed budgets for athletic programs and secured over \$450,000 in grants for service learning and science. This means I don't just look at "numbers" on a spreadsheet; I understand the human cost and the instructional impact behind every line item. I have had classes in school finance and know what the stipulations are in different funding sources that help the system meet our goal of providing the best education for our students. I will use this experience to ensure our budget prioritizes the classroom and that policy decisions are grounded in the daily realities of our teachers.

3. What are your top three priorities for Avery County Schools over the next four years?

1. Student-Centered Excellence

Students must always come first. Every decision we make should align with our mission: to prepare students for success by providing the best education possible while fostering perseverance, innovation, and creativity in a supportive environment. This means focusing on high-quality instruction, strong relationships, and ensuring every student—regardless of background—has the opportunity to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally.

2. Teacher & Staff Support and Development

Great schools depend on great educators. We must invest in recruiting, supporting, and retaining teachers and staff by providing competitive compensation, professional respect, and meaningful support. This includes access to instructional resources, classroom supplements, ongoing training, and staff development opportunities. Supporting affordable housing and

long-term stability for educators is also critical so they can live, grow, and remain invested in our community.

3. Long-Range Planning & Community Connection

A strong school system requires thoughtful long-term planning to stay focused on our goals and prepared for future challenges. This includes expanding Career and Technical Education (CTE) and vocational pathways that connect students to local industries such as construction, healthcare, agriculture, and skilled trades. Just as important is rebuilding trust and connection between the Board, families, educators, and the community through transparency, accessibility, and regular communication.

4. What is your long-term vision for the future of public education in Avery County?

In 5–10 years, I see Avery County Schools as a state leader in rural education—a district where enrollment has stabilized because families see us as the premier choice. My vision includes a "pK-14" mindset where every graduate leaves with either college credit or a professional certification, and where our district is known for its culture that supports the whole child.

Policy & Operational Questions

5. How should the Board address teacher and bus driver staffing and retention?

We must move beyond simply expressing respect for our educators and staff and move toward truly valuing them through action. Teacher and bus driver retention is not just a staffing issue—it is a student success issue.

First, we must work closely with County Commissioners to provide competitive local salary supplements so Avery County can remain competitive with neighboring districts. Second, for bus drivers, we should remove unnecessary barriers by streamlining CDL reimbursement, covering required medical exams, and providing clear support throughout the hiring and training process.

Finally, affordable housing must be part of the conversation. As a high-cost mountain community, Avery County must explore partnerships and creative solutions to help new teachers, instructional assistants, and other school employees live and remain in the community they serve.

When we invest in the people who show up for our students every day, we strengthen our schools, stabilize our workforce, and demonstrate that Avery County truly values education.

6. What is your position on current academic performance?

While North Carolina has seen recent improvements in academic outcomes, there is still important work to do. Statewide data show that standardized test scores and school performance measures have reached multi-year highs in many subjects, and graduation rates have climbed to their highest levels in a decade, with the overall four-year cohort rate at about 87.7 % in 2024–25. However, proficiency in reading and math remains below pre-pandemic

levels, with just over half of students scoring at grade-level proficiency on state exams, and continued challenges—especially in early reading and some high school courses.

In Avery County, while graduation rates remain strong relative to many districts, we must also focus on academic proficiency in K–12 reading and math to ensure students are truly mastering foundational skills and prepared for post-secondary success.

As someone who has overseen testing at multiple levels (state, AP, CTE), I believe we must use data-driven instruction and targeted supports such as high-impact tutoring to close learning gaps and accelerate achievement. This includes supporting educators with the resources and professional development they need to respond effectively to data, adjusting instruction based on what the data show, and celebrating the progress our students make while continuing to push for excellence.

7. How would you bridge performance gaps across school districts/schools?

Equity does not mean giving every school or student the same thing—it means ensuring each student gets what they need to succeed. Bridging performance gaps requires a thoughtful, data-driven approach that responds to real differences in student needs, resources, and learning opportunities.

I support using data to strategically pool resources such as specialized teachers, interventionists, and targeted instructional supports to provide intensive academic boosts where they are most needed. At the same time, we must continue offering opportunities for advanced learning through expanded electives, honors courses, and enrichment programs that challenge and motivate students who are ready to excel.

By balancing targeted intervention with opportunities for academic excellence—and by supporting educators with the tools and flexibility they need—we can raise achievement across all schools while honoring the unique strengths and needs of each community.

8. How would you advocate for struggling/disadvantaged students?

Success for struggling students requires embedded support, not add-ons after the fact. Through my experience with MTSS (Multi-Tiered System of Supports) and as an At-Risk Coordinator, I have learned that academic success improves when counseling, mentorship, and targeted interventions are intentionally built into the school day.

I strongly support maintaining low student-to-counselor ratios. Avery County currently averages approximately 293 students per counselor, which is better than the state average, and it is important that we protect and strengthen that advantage. I also believe in expanding trauma-resilient practices and coaching so educators are better equipped to support students facing adversity.

In addition, we must deepen community partnerships—not only with mental health providers, but also with civic organizations, faith-based groups, and local educational partners such as Lees-McRae College, Mayland Community College, Appalachian State University, and Crossnore Communities for Children, as well as cross-generational and mentoring programs. When we surround students with consistent, caring adults and meaningful mentorship, we create the conditions for long-term success both in and beyond the classroom.

9. Adverse weather and remote learning: Pros and Cons?

Remote learning during adverse weather can be a useful tool when implemented thoughtfully. One of the primary benefits is maintaining instructional momentum and avoiding an extended school calendar that pushes the school year deep into June. However, there are real challenges. Avery County faces a digital divide, particularly in more remote areas with limited or unreliable internet access. Additionally, remote learning can reduce the face-to-face support that Exceptional Children (EC) students and other learners depend on. To address these concerns, the district must ensure that offline learning options—such as prepared “choice boards” or printed materials—are readily available for students without high-speed internet. We should also continue prioritizing the makeup of instructional hours rather than entire days to allow flexibility for families. If remote learning is to be used in place of traditional makeup days, it is essential that it be a true instructional model. That means lessons must be thorough, aligned with state standards, and structured to ensure attendance, engagement, and accountability. Just as important, input from teachers, students, and parents should guide any long-term approach so that remote learning supports—not replaces—quality education.

10. How would you promote accountability among teaching staff?

As a former teacher and current school administrator, I believe accountability begins with clear expectations, meaningful support, and high-quality feedback. I support using the North Carolina Educator Evaluation System not as a “gotcha” tool, but as a roadmap for professional growth and continuous improvement.

Accountability should also include recognizing and celebrating excellence. Teachers need to know their work is valued and appreciated, and that growth is expected—for both educators and students—within a supportive learning environment.

When situations arise that require corrective action, we must be prepared to address them thoughtfully and responsibly. Doing so ensures public trust in our schools and demonstrates that we respect the responsibility we have been entrusted with: educating and caring for our children.

11. How would you approach transparency and communication?

Transparency and communication must be intentional, consistent, and two-way. Too often, communication feels like information being handed down rather than a conversation. I believe trust is built when people understand not only *what* decisions are made, but *why* they are made.

The Board should communicate clearly and proactively through multiple channels and ensure information is accessible to families, staff, and community members. Equally important is creating regular opportunities for feedback—through advisory councils, town halls, school visits, and community events—so voices are heard before decisions are finalized.

As a Board member, I will remain visible and approachable, attending school events, meeting with educators and families, and encouraging open dialogue. Transparency is not just about posting information; it's about listening, explaining, and responding with honesty and respect so our community feels informed, valued, and confident in the direction of Avery County Schools.

12. How should the Board balance the budget?

The Board must approach budgeting with precision, transparency, and fiscal responsibility. Based on my experience working with school finances, grants, and programs at multiple levels, I believe in being efficient and strategic with limited resources.

I support a “people over programs” approach—prioritizing classroom teachers, instructional assistants, and the staff who directly support student learning and daily operations. These positions have the greatest impact on students and families.

At the same time, the Board should regularly review spending in areas such as redundant administrative software, underutilized services, and administrative roles that are far removed from classroom instruction. When appropriate, consolidation and reallocation of funds can ensure resources are directed where they are most needed, while maintaining a well-managed and effective school system.

13. What role should the Board have in setting curriculum standards?

In North Carolina, the Standard Course of Study is established by the State Board of Education, and local boards are responsible for ensuring those standards are implemented effectively. The role of the local Board is not to dictate curriculum content, but to provide oversight, support, and accountability in how instruction is delivered.

The Board should work closely with district leadership, educators, and the community to ensure curriculum implementation reflects Avery County's values—honoring our heritage while preparing students for success in a modern, diverse, and competitive workforce. Drawing on my experience as a service-learning educator, I believe strongly in expanding authentic learning opportunities such as internships, apprenticeships, and community-based projects that help students transition successfully from the classroom into college, careers, and adult life.

School Climate & Community Engagement

14. What is your approach to a safe, inclusive environment?

A safe school environment is about far more than locked doors and procedures—it is about culture, relationships, and trust. Students learn best when they feel physically safe, emotionally supported, and genuinely included.

As a **Certified Trauma & Resilience Coach**, I believe schools must intentionally build environments that recognize the impact of trauma, teach coping skills, and promote positive behavior. This includes supporting trauma-informed practices, restorative approaches, and proactive social-emotional learning that help prevent issues before they escalate.

I strongly support peer-to-peer programs such as **Link Crew**, which I coordinated for many years. By implementing Link Crew mentoring alongside strong arts programs, athletic programs, clubs, and student organizations, schools can help every student find a connection and a sense of belonging. When students are connected and valued, incidents of bullying decrease and engagement increases.

When schools intentionally create multiple pathways for involvement and supportive relationships, we build inclusive environments where students feel known, respected, and supported—creating safer, stronger schools for everyone.

15. How would you foster mental health using a trauma-informed approach?

We must train every staff member—from the bus driver to the principal—to recognize the signs of trauma and understand how trauma can impact student behavior, learning, and relationships. Students often carry stress, anxiety, or adverse experiences into school, and those challenges may appear as disengagement, behavior issues, or academic struggles rather than intentional misconduct. When all adults in a school share a common understanding of trauma-informed practices, students experience greater consistency, safety, and support throughout the day—not just in the classroom.

This training should include recognizing early warning signs, using de-escalation strategies, building positive relationships, and knowing when and how to refer students for additional support. Trauma-informed schools respond with empathy and structure, helping students develop coping skills while maintaining high expectations.

By implementing programs such as **Link Crew mentoring**, we further strengthen this support system. Link Crew connects students to trained peer leaders who provide guidance, encouragement, and a sense of belonging—especially during key transitions. When combined with trauma-informed staff training, peer mentoring helps create a school culture where students feel seen, supported, and valued, reducing bullying and increasing engagement.

Together, comprehensive staff training and intentional mentoring programs create safer, more inclusive schools where every student has trusted adults and peers supporting their success.

16. How would you increase language resources (Latino/ESL)?

With a Latino community that works and serves our area in many helpful ways, we should view bilinguality as a "superpower" for students. I would advocate for "Dual Language" elective tracks or "Global Languages" in middle school. This helps ESL students bridge the gap while giving native English speakers a competitive edge in the global economy.

17. Promoting inclusivity while honoring local culture?

Our history in Avery County—the agriculture, the trades, the mountain resilience—is our foundation. A "modern" education means taking those local values and applying them to a broader world. We can honor our local culture through expanded Ag-Science and CTE programs while ensuring our history and literature classes reflect a complete perspective.

18. How should the school system engage parents/stakeholders?

Avery County Schools already benefit from parent representation through school improvement teams and advisory committees, and those voices are essential. I believe we should build on that foundation by strengthening communication and creating a more consistent, system-level structure for parent and stakeholder input.

I support establishing a district-level Parent Advisory Council that meets regularly with the Superintendent and includes representation from across the county. Engagement should not be limited to information being handed down; decisions are strongest when they are built from the ground up with meaningful input from parents, educators, students, and community partners. As a Board member, I also believe accessibility matters. Parents and stakeholders should feel comfortable approaching me at ball games, school events, community gatherings, by email, or at town halls. I want to hear concerns directly and work collaboratively to ensure every voice is heard and that our students, teachers, and families feel supported and valued.

19. Addressing concerns of those who feel unheard?

Accessibility is key. When people feel unheard, it is often because opportunities for input are limited or inconvenient. Addressing this requires going beyond traditional meetings and intentionally meeting people where they are.

I believe in hosting town halls, attending school events and parent nights at different schools, and being present at civic clubs, church meetings, and community gatherings. Most importantly, the community needs to know that their voices are welcomed and valued.

As a Board member, I will remain visible and accessible—listening, engaging, and advocating not just from the boardroom, but throughout the community—to ensure concerns are heard and addressed in a meaningful way.

Local & Practical Concerns

20. Promoting accessibility during adverse winter weather?

Mountain living requires flexibility, thoughtful planning, and safety-first decision making. The school system must work closely with the North Carolina Department of Transportation to prioritize clearing school bus routes and address hazardous travel conditions.

We should also consider options such as hub pickups, altered schedules, or flexible attendance practices that do not penalize students in remote areas who may be unable to safely reach a bus stop. While instructional time is important, safety must always come first.

Students, staff, and parents should know that we value their time and commitment to education, but we will never ask anyone to place themselves in harm's way. During severe weather, the district must continue working collaboratively with families and employees to make decisions that prioritize safety while supporting learning whenever possible.

21. Most pressing education challenge right now?

The most pressing challenge facing Avery County Schools is **rebuilding capacity and trust while closing learning gaps**—all at the same time. In recent years, schools have faced staffing shortages, enrollment shifts, and lingering academic and social impacts from disruptions to learning. These challenges affect students, teachers, and families alike.

To move forward, we must support and retain high-quality educators, strengthen student supports—especially in reading, math, and mental health—and restore meaningful connections between the school system and the community. When educators feel supported, families feel heard, and students receive the targeted help they need, academic recovery and long-term success become achievable.

This moment requires steady leadership, thoughtful planning, and a renewed focus on students—because addressing learning gaps, staffing stability, and trust are inseparable challenges that must be solved together.

22. Expanding vocational/college-readiness?

Avery County Schools is fortunate to partner with Mayland Community College, and we should continue to expand opportunities that help students transition successfully into college, careers, or the workforce. I strongly support growing our Career & College Promise (CCP) pathways so more students graduate with industry-valued credentials while still in high school.

This includes expanding programs in high-demand fields such as automotive technology, construction trades, HVAC, agriculture, animal science, cosmetology, nursing, welding, and computer science. By strengthening these pathways and aligning them with local workforce needs, we can ensure students are prepared for meaningful employment, technical careers, or further education.

Providing students with hands-on learning, certifications, and real-world experience gives them options—and that is the true goal of college and career readiness.

23. Responding to changes in enrollment/funding?

We must be proactive, not reactive, when responding to changes in enrollment and funding. Shifts in leadership, economic conditions, and expanded educational options make it more important than ever for Avery County Schools to remain a strong, competitive choice for families.

Decisions should be guided by accurate data and meaningful community input, especially when facing difficult but necessary choices. The Board has a responsibility to regularly evaluate programs and policies to ensure resources are being used effectively and are directly benefiting students.

When programs are no longer serving students well, we must be willing to reallocate funding toward what matters most—classroom instruction, teacher support, and student success—while maintaining transparency and fiscal responsibility.

Personal/Values Questions

24. How Do You Define Success for Avery County Students?

Success is not defined by a single test score. Success means a graduate who is prepared for life beyond high school—enrolled, enlisted, or employed. Whether a student is heading to a four-year university, community college, the military, or directly into a skilled trade, success means they have the academic foundation, practical skills, and character to contribute positively to their community.

As someone who began my own journey as a child with a major hearing loss and learning difficulties, I believe deeply in multiple pathways. When students leave our schools confident, capable, and prepared for their chosen future, we have done our job well.

25. What Would You Do Differently from Current Board Members?

I will bring the perspective of a career-long practitioner. After more than 35 years as a teacher, administrator, coach, and service-learning educator in North Carolina public schools, I understand how Board decisions play out in real classrooms—not just on paper.

While current Board members are committed and well-intentioned, I offer an instructional lens grounded in daily school operations, student needs, and teacher realities. Every policy decision should be evaluated by one essential question: Will this actually work for students, families and educators in Avery County classrooms?

26. How Will You Ensure Decisions Are Student-Centered but Taxpayer-Friendly?

Student-centered and taxpayer-friendly decisions are not competing goals—they go hand in hand. I believe strongly in evaluating the return on investment for every dollar spent. Resources should be directed toward what most directly improves student outcomes: strong instruction, well-supported educators, and meaningful learning opportunities.

As a successful grant writer who has secured over \$450,000 in external funding, I have demonstrated the ability to bring in outside resources to support students while easing the burden on local taxpayers. Careful budgeting, long-range planning, and strategic use of grants allow us to provide high-quality opportunities for students without unnecessary strain on the community.