

2026 Candidates Forum Questionnaire

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 to serve on the school board?

A good education is a ticket to a better life. I want children in Avery County to learn in a safe inviting learning environment, to be equipped academically and socially, and to be prepared to be good citizens after they leave our schools. I want teachers and staff in Avery County to teach and work in a safe inviting school with the resources, support, and respect they need to meet the needs of the children and the community they serve. It is important to me that Avery County Schools be second to none in the educational opportunities that are offered to students. We have a good school system and I want to work with the other members of the Board, our administrators, the teachers, parents and community to make it great.

2. What experiences – professional, volunteer or personal – uniquely qualify you to serve on the Board? How will that experience influence your decisions on policy and budgeting?

My entire professional career -over fifty years - has been devoted to public education. I cannot imagine another path to have been so rewarding or challenging. In my thirty-one years in Avery County Schools, I was a classroom teacher for fifteen years teaching grades 6-12 before moving to an administrative position at Avery High. I served as an Assistant Principal at Avery High for eight years, principal at Cranberry Middle School for one year, principal at Avery High School for seven years, and principal at Freedom Trail Elementary for one year. Having spent so many years teaching and in school administration, I gained insight and experience into strategies and programs that positively affect teaching and learning. After retirement from Avery County Schools, I was Avery County's Dual Enrollment Advisor for Mayland Community College for five years and an

Adjunct Professor at Appalachian State University in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction as a student teacher field supervisor in Avery, Mitchell, McDowell, and Forsyth counties for nine years. I received my teaching and administrative degrees at Appalachian State University and am a graduate of the Principal's Executive Program at UNC-Chapel Hill. I was elected to the Avery County Board of Education in 2018.

Having worked with system budgets both as a principal and as a board member, I understand the resources available from state, federal, and local sources and the restrictions on how they may or may not be used. If re-elected my priority will be as it has always been – to meet the needs of the children first.

3. What are your top three priorities for the Avery County Schools over the next four years? *Examples could include academic performance, student safety, teacher recruitment/retention, infrastructure, technology, etc.*

One extremely high priority is to continue to address learning loss for children as a result of the COVID outbreak and Hurricane Helene.

Approximately one entire “year” of face-to-face “seat” instruction was lost as a result of these disasters. Our teachers, staff, and administrators have worked hard to help children “catch up” on the concepts missed and to move forward. More must be done and resources provided to meet this priority.

Another equally important priority is to continue to aggressively address the low-performing academic scores of two of our schools. State provided resources and opportunities for staff support and training have been implemented but scores continue to be lower than acceptable. As a member of the Board, I will continue to support and implement recommendations from the Department of Public Instruction as well as from our Superintendent, administrators, and other Board members to address this need.

A third priority is to determine how to address and incorporate AI (Artificial Intelligence) and other developing technologies into the curriculum in a safe and positive manner. It is a difficult challenge to navigate and will require extensive study, evaluation, and staff development. Student safety and educational needs must be the primary consideration.

4. What is your long-term vision for the future of public education in Avery County? Where would you like to see the district in 5-10 years?

In the next two-three years, my “vision” is to see Avery County Schools become more of “school system” as opposed to a “system of schools”. In a small district, it is easy for each school – especially at the elementary and middle levels – to become a “stand-alone” and become more competitive than collaborative. Small schools may have only one or two teachers at a certain grade level. Same grade level teachers need opportunities to collaborate, share ideas, and work together to develop engaging lesson plans. Administrators also need opportunities to share ideas for school improvement, work together to solve problems, and celebrate each other’s successes. Both vertical and horizontal alignment for curriculum is essential and collaborative grouping of teachers and administrators fosters growth for all students.

Technology is advancing rapidly. With the expectation of a qualified teacher shortage continuing and with many teachers in Avery County Schools nearing retirement in the next ten years, I see the role of the teacher possibly changing from traditional teaching to using technology to design more personalized learning experiences. If this happens, extensive staff development will be needed to incorporate technological advances for the benefit of students while maintaining a nurturing and interactive learning environment that includes building relationships, interacting with peers, and collaborative group learning which is so important for the mental health of both students and teachers. My vision for our school system, is to use technologies to enhance good teaching and to not replace it.

Policy and Operational Questions

5. How should the Board address teacher as well as school bus driver staffing and retention challenges, including compensation and professional support? What specific steps would you advocate?

Teacher pay in North Carolina is one of the lowest in the nation. Avery County Schools often have licensed, experienced teachers who would like

to live and teach in Avery County but cannot due to the lack of housing that is affordable and available for rent or purchase – especially for beginning teachers. Working with community partners and county commissioners is essential to solving this problem.

Teachers are underpaid for what they are expected to do. I would like to see teacher pay increased and substantial bonuses paid for outstanding performance. Signing bonuses and retention bonuses would be very effective in attracting and retaining qualified individuals in hard-to-find licensure areas. Unfortunately, small rural systems do not often have the funding to provide these incentives for teachers.

Most of our bus drivers live in Avery County or the surrounding areas. Over the past few years, pay has been increased, bonuses have been paid for perfect attendance, and benefits and other offers have been tried and been successful to an extent. However, we still have a shortage of school bus drivers. It is a difficult issue.

6. What is your position on the current academic performance of Avery County Schools? *How will you work with administrators to improve student outcomes?*

My position is that there is a considerable opportunity for improvement in many areas. According to NC Schools Report Card grades, Avery County has some schools doing well, some in the OK range, and one that has been low-performing for the past several years. The elementary schools have all met or exceeded growth in the past two years while the secondary schools have not. DPI provides assistance through regional consultants who evaluate methodology and provide staff development to staff and administrators. The administrators at each school are provided disaggregated data for use in evaluating areas of concern. Funding is available for administrators through Federal and state sources and grants as well as through local donors for extra support personnel, tutors, and materials to meet identified needs in lower performing schools.

Administrators at both the school and central office level must continue to use data to identify areas for improvement, share successful strategies, and ensure that the Standard Course of Study is being followed in all

classrooms. It is the responsibility of the Board to determine other measures that may need to be taken.

7. How would you bridge performance gaps across school districts, advocating for students in underperforming schools with a remedial boost, while also continuing to best serve the competitive schools' students? *What specific steps would you take to promote this kind of equity and thriving?*

Each school is unique in demographics and need. Teachers are equitably allotted to each school based on ADM (Average Daily Membership) from state and federal sources. The first step is to identify the specific needs. The second step is to secure resources. Every school system receives state and federal funding to provide extra support to schools with remedial needs. The administration at each school uses disaggregated test score data to determine the best use of resources to meet the remedial needs of the students/subgroups in their respective schools. The extra support given to areas of need should not distract or derail the progress of students who do not need extra support academically.

8. How would you advocate for struggling students and students with disadvantaged backgrounds? *For example, they may need mentorship and counseling embedded into their school days.*

I think the first step is to look at data. Data can be broken down by subgroups to best determine where and what the needs are. Extra support resources such as tutoring, counseling, small group instruction, etc. can be made available to students in targeted groups. Targeted staff development for teachers can also be very beneficial to meet the needs of certain subgroups. Early intervention is very effective for improvements among students who struggle. It is not a best practice to wait until they fail. Successes need to be acknowledged and celebrated. A very important key in all of these strategies is to involve parents and have their support.

9. Adverse weather is a reality that impacts mountain schools with remote learning days currently used for make-up. *What are some of the pros and cons of this method that can be addressed?*

Actually, remote days are not “make-up” days, they are actual instructional days and count as a “school day”.

The Pros for remote learning are:

- 1) Students have some level of instruction required on a remote day to review previously taught concepts or to explore new content for older students
- 2) Avoids extending the school calendar into early or mid-Jun

The cons:

- 1) Not all students have reliable internet service in Avery County
- 2) Younger children struggle more with independent work – especially new material that has not been previously covered in class
- 3) Requires heavy parental involvement especially for younger students
- 4) Hands-on courses do not fit well into a remote environment such as art, music, science labs, PE, CTE courses,
- 5) Increased stress on families

In my opinion, the “cons” outweigh the “pros” and except in extenuating circumstances should not be used in lieu of face-to-face “seat time” for students -even if it means extending the school calendar.

10. How would you promote, test and support standards of excellence and accountability among teaching staff?

A school board member does not directly manage or evaluate teachers. School board members operate on a policy and oversight level. The school principal is charged by state law with specific responsibilities regarding teacher performance that includes setting high standards, completing teacher observations, providing support for struggling teachers, and using observations as well as test data to evaluate teachers. A Board member’s role would be more of an advocate. Providing time in the school calendar for targeted professional development, setting clear expectations for performance in board policy, and celebrating teacher and student successes would be the appropriate role for a board member.

11. How would you approach transparency and communication between the Board and community (parents, educators, taxpayers)? *What methods or channels would you support for regular updates and feedback?*

“Transparency” doesn’t mean sharing everything that the Board does. The Board deals with some information that is confidential that cannot be shared publicly and is protected by Federal law. However, there is a lot of information that can be shared including budget, audits, salaries, employee licensure and qualifications, school board policies, to identify a few. Over the past 2-3 years, Avery County Schools has utilized approximately 100 hours of employee time to research and provide around 20,000 pages – mostly in digital format - of publicly requested documents to individuals. In addition to open board meetings, the system currently uses social media posts, the ACS webpage, individual school’s newsletters, and system-wide phone call notifications for public information. I do think one area that could be improved is hearing directly from stake-holders as is planned for February 12th on a school reorganization plan. As a board member, I would support holding more community forums separately from regularly scheduled school board meetings to hear from stakeholders and to share initiatives and other information that would be of interest to the community.

12. How should the Board balance the budget while meeting the needs of students, teachers, and families? *Are there areas that you think should be funded more or less?*

The Board must prepare the budget in alignment with identified needs and priorities. Many parts of the budget are determined by the restrictions that come with the funding source and limit the choices. Federal and state funds have very specific targets. Local funds are allocated as capital projects or general operations and must be used categorically. When enrollment declines, state funding for teaching positions also declines. The Board must adjust the budget accordingly by reducing teaching and/staffing positions -preferably by retirement or attrition.

While there are several areas that could use additional support, I would personally like to be able to increase funding to specifically address learning loss.

13. What role should the Board have in setting curriculum standards or guidelines? *How do you balance state requirements with local needs?*

The State of North Carolina has very specific requirements regarding standards for earning a high school diploma. A school system must follow the NC Standard Course of Study guidelines K-12. Administrators develop a school schedule to ensure the requirements will be met. Federal money and grants allow schools to offer CTE elective programs. CTE courses are determined by student interest, community needs, and employment opportunities. The community college dual enrollment program and certificate programs allow students to expand their vocational interests. The dual enrollment program also allows students the opportunity to earn an Associate Degree before graduating from high school. The “balancing” comes by collecting data from both within the school community and, for the high school, through coordination and input from the Business Advisory Council.

School Climate and Community Engagement

14. What is your approach to ensuring a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment for all students? Do you support specific policies related to bullying prevention, mental health support, or school climate programs? How could you help Avery County Schools promote a culture that values and teaches respect, consent, and safety every day?

Avery County Schools has policies that prohibit bullying, and address school safety and school climate. The board must have high expectations and oversight for policies to be followed consistently in order to create a safe, respectful, and conducive learning environment for students, staff, and teachers. It is the responsibility of the school board to make and enforce policy consistently in order to develop a culture with high expectations. Administrators and teachers must work together to provide this environment for students with specific initiatives that meet the needs of their individual school.

15. How would you foster mental health across schools among students and staff, including a trauma-informed approach toward wellness?

A trauma-informed approach in a school setting works on the premise that everyone has experienced some type of trauma. Developing a school environment that is inviting, nurturing, safe, and inclusive is key.

Avery County Schools currently have a school-based mental health professional to support the highest needs. Over the past few years, school staff have participated in professional development and book studies related to trauma informed practices. Staff are required to have mental health training each year to identify students or staff that need additional support

Supporting principals, teachers, and counselors to build a supportive school culture with resources that help students build positive relationships is the role of a board member.

16. How would you increase language learning resources not only for the benefit of Latino students but to help with bilinguality among native English-speaking students so they can engage with their Latino classmates and community around them? *Latino and minority students are a significant part of the Avery County Schools community and ESL classes help with language bridging for native Spanish speakers.*

“ESL” is now described as “ML” – a more inclusive term known as “multilingual learner”. A successful learning environment for ML students is one where language development and academic progress happen together. Pullout classes help students to an extent but the most effective strategy, according to research, is interaction between the multilingual students and English-speaking students – not isolating students in separate classes for extensive periods. Supporting multilingual learners effectively works best when a variety of teaching and learning strategies are implemented. It is often difficult to find teachers with ML certification. Requiring staff development training for all teachers who have ML students in their classes would provide strategies for meeting the needs of these students in a diverse classroom. It is important to value and to celebrate the culture of the all students through various opportunities and strategies, to involve

their parents by providing materials in the native language, and celebrating accomplishments.

17. How would you promote inclusivity, respect, and equity among all students with regard to their different socioeconomic, cultural, racial or religious origins? How would you make sure the students of Avery County grow with a complete, modern, multicultural education that simultaneously honors the local culture of Avery County?

Equal access to all course offerings, extracurricular activities and enrichment opportunities is essential. All students need to feel respected, valued, and seen as individuals - not “labeled” due to differing backgrounds. Having worked in the system for many years, I think that Avery County Schools does a good job through individual career counseling and course scheduling. A school board should have policies that ensure that all students have equal access to all opportunities and require that these policies be followed.

18. How should the school system engage parents and community stakeholders to decision-making?

Schools are required to have “School Improvement Teams” that include parents, teachers, and community stakeholders to offer suggestions and feedback on ways to meet the needs of students and provide input on budgeting priorities. These teams are required to meet several times during the school year. System level meetings in Avery County currently include a Parent Advisory Council, Student Advisory Council, Staff Advisory Council, a children’s collaborative group for Early Childhood, a Business Advisory Council, as well as individual business leaders who offer support for related CTE programs. Input is valued and these groups help strengthen Avery County Schools and programs. Adding occasional public forums separate from Board meetings could be another opportunity for engaging the community.

19. How would you address concerns from community members who feel under-informed or unheard on education issues?

The board policies encourage individuals who have concerns to schedule an appointment with the appropriate teacher, principal, director, or superintendent to request information, share a concern, or inform on education issues. Board members are available to listen but do not always have the information needed to respond and by policy, will refer you to the appropriate person in the “chain of command” to resolve. When appropriate, input surveys are used to solicit feedback from parents and stakeholders.

Ethically, an individual board member should not investigate a situation or offer a resolution since the Board functions as a group in a decision-making role. The Board serves as the final decision-maker in providing a decision or resolution.

Local and Practical Concerns

20. Often, school bus routes become more limited because of adverse weather. How would you promote accessibility at school, since students have varying levels of public road accessibility, especially following adverse winter?

This situation has been a concern for many years. Running limited routes with designated pick-up points has been the best solution for students who live on the roads most often closed to safe bus travel. ACS’s transportation department works closely with the NCDOT to open as many roads as possible for safe bus travel during adverse conditions.

If school is on a schedule with limited bus routes, parents/guardians can transport their children to school. For students that do not have that option, teachers and staff work with the affected students to help them catch up on missed work when they return to school. Many teachers also send work home with students in advance of bad weather if appropriate. Technology could be beneficial if the affected students have internet access, a device at home, and the classroom has the appropriate technology available to provide instruction live online.

21.What do you see as Avery County's most pressing education challenge right now? What ideas do you propose to address the challenge?

I think the most pressing educational challenge for Avery County is a combination of declining enrollment, decreased state and federal funding as a result of declining enrollment, a qualified teacher shortage, and the low-performing status of two of our schools. All of these are inner-connected and must be addressed simultaneously. The Board must work with the Superintendent, directors, school administrators, teachers, and county commissioners to develop a plan to meet the needs of the students. The current Board has considered multiple options and will be seeking public input on one option on February 12th.

22.In what ways should the Board support or expand vocational, technical, or college-readiness opportunities for students?

The CTE program is a valuable part of the school curriculum and is developed to align with the needs of the local community. Partnering with the community college for dual enrollment classes expands opportunities for students who want to enter the skilled work force after graduation as well as for those who plan to continue their education at the college or university level. Partnering with local businesses to provide internships, apprenticeships, and job shadowing expands opportunities as well for all students. This process is continually reviewed and adjusted to meet the needs of the students.

23.How should the Board respond to changes in enrollment, demographics, or funding levels?

When enrollment declines, state and federal funding for teaching positions declines also. When enrollment at smaller schools drops below 100 students, state funding for a school administrator is lost. The Board must evaluate and prioritize how to best meet the needs of all students. With public school enrollment steadily declining in Avery County as well in North Carolina, per pupil expenditure from local sources in the smaller schools increases. One option is to consolidate schools to save the cost of operating the physical cost of a school building (heating, water, electrical, maintenance, staffing) or use locally provided funding for these expenses.

Using the locally provided funds for keeping a building “open” is at the expense of using the local funds for the enhancement of the academic program and the needs of students.

Personal/Value Questions

24. How do you define success for students in Avery County Schools and what metrics most matter to you?

The metrics that are used most in education to define “success” are not the metrics that matter most to me. Standardized test scores, GPA, course grades, and graduation rates are important, easily measured and used most often to evaluate “success”. The state of North Carolina bases the School Report Card Grade on a formula of 80% End of Grade or End of Course test scores and 20% on “academic growth” based on comparative standardized test scores. The metrics that matter more to me are more subjectively measured. Can a student think critically, analyze, problem-solve, communicate effectively, and persist through a challenge? Can they work collaboratively with other students, manage time, and advocate for themselves. Are they prepared for the next step they want to take after leaving high school?

25. What would you do differently from current Board members if elected?

Since I am a “current board member” I will leave that question to the three who are not currently on the Board. I think it is important to understand that a board functions collaboratively and make decisions corporately. Members must stay within their defined role and not work to micromanage or promote a personal agenda.

26. How will you ensure your decisions are students-centered while also considering taxpayer interests?

There are two considerations in determining whether a decision is “student-centered”: 1) Does this decision improve student learning,

well-being, and growth? or 2) does it mainly serve adult benefit, tradition, or convenience?

As for taxpayer interests: Is this decision or program the best available and most cost-effective to meet the identified need?

Fortunately, many student-centered decisions are also beneficial for teachers and staff which is definitely a win-win situation.