

# **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?**

- The number one reason is my kids. To invest my time and effort into ensuring an enriching and impactful experience for them and all students in our system.
- Second would be to support our educators and leadership in our schools. The reason I left teaching (not in Avery) early on in my career was because of a lack of support, failing infrastructure, and unreasonable class sizes that didn't benefit students or educators.
- As a business operator, I believe it is our responsibility to ensure that our school system is equipped to turn out the best and brightest. • To use any ability that I may possess to promote, invest in and advocate for our kids, their teachers, school staff members, leadership, etc.
- I was always taught that "if you do not bring with you a solution to a problem, then you are just complaining" and I am not one to complain.

#### **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?**

- Personally, having a young family with kids in the system serves as motivation to work towards making Avery County Schools the best possible for them, their friends and those that follow. I have seen the

incredible things that our schools offer our children. Many children are not afforded the family atmosphere that our system can provide. We have counselors texting after a kid has a hard day to check on them and to keep parents informed, Principals dressing like the Grinch to see kids smile and build relationships, we have custodians, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers who love our kids like their own and take pride in ensuring our kids are fed, that their environment is clean and safe and they arrive home from school to their parents just as they left them that morning. It would be a privilege to ensure that those people have the tools they need to be successful and to remove obstacles to their success.

- Professionally, I have been with the Williams YMCA of Avery County for over 15 years. The last 13 as CEO. My job has revolved around budgeting and fiscal management, program growth, community service and impact, advocacy at the Local, State and Federal levels, capital planning, capital development, fundraising, leadership training, staff retention, etc. Where this could serve Avery County Schools is:
  - Continued growth in out of school programming—Summer, After-School, Snow Days, Mentoring and Homework Help
  - Experience working with the Department of Public Instruction in Raleigh and managing funds passed through from the Federal Gov to the State of NC.
  - Developing short- and long-term capital plans and developing plans for funding those projects.
    - Thanks to incredible people, relationship building and vision, over the past couple of years, I have raised over \$25,000,000 to build an athletic facility, an early learning full day daycare center, a youth center and a new state of the art full size YMCA. All opened debt free and on target.
  - Utilizing constructive feedback from staff and families to create a better experience for those involved.
  - Employee Retention
  - I work for a Board of Director's as well and understand the importance of trust, transparency, dialog, and teamwork to accomplish goals set by the organization.
- Volunteering, most of my experience has been in athletics from youth programs to High School Baseball, Football, and Track in both SC and NC. I see and understand the needs of our student athletes and believe in addition to academics we should invest in them and their coaches with on campus facilities.

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

- Only being able to choose three I would say, student experience/safety, staff recruitment and retention, and quality infrastructure.

**• Student Experience / Safety**

Prioritizing student experience and safety—both physical and mental—creates environments where students are ready to learn and succeed. When students feel safe, supported, and engaged, attendance improves, behavioral issues decrease, and academic achievement follows. From a budget standpoint, investing proactively in safety, mental health, and school climate reduces costly reactive spending related to discipline, crisis response, and staff burnout. A positive student experience also builds trust with families, helping stabilize enrollment and long-term funding, which supports system continuity. •

**Staff Recruitment and Retention**

Staff stability is essential to student success. Retaining experienced teachers, support staff, and bus drivers ensures instructional consistency, strong relationships, and institutional knowledge. Financially, retention is far more cost-effective than repeated recruitment, onboarding, and training. Lower turnover reduces substitute costs and limits disruptions that impact learning. A stable workforce also supports leadership continuity and allows the system to focus on improvement rather than recovery.

**• Quality Infrastructure**

Safe, functional facilities directly support learning, health, and safety. Deferred maintenance often leads to higher long-term costs, emergency repairs, and instructional disruptions. Thoughtful, long term capital planning helps manage resources responsibly, avoids crisis spending, and aligns facilities with enrollment and program needs. Strong infrastructure planning also signals stability and confidence to staff, families, and the community, reinforcing long-term system continuity.

**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?**

Once student experience and safety are strong, staff are stable, and infrastructure needs are addressed, the next phase for Avery County Schools should focus on **growth, opportunity, and long-term resilience**.

### **1. Expand Student Opportunity and Pathways**

With a stable foundation, the district can broaden academic, technical, and career pathways. This includes strengthening early college, expanding partnerships with Mayland Community College, reintroducing and growing the trades, and increasing access to certifications, apprenticeships, and work-based learning. The goal is for every graduate to leave with a clear, supported path forward.

### **2. Deepen Community and Workforce Partnerships**

A successful system should become more integrated with the community. Expanding partnerships with local employers, nonprofits, healthcare providers, and higher education can enhance student supports, reduce costs, and strengthen workforce alignment—helping students stay, work, and thrive in Avery County.

**3. Invest in Innovation and Continuous Improvement** With stability achieved, the Board can support thoughtful innovation—using data to refine instruction, expand effective programs, and invest in technology and teaching practices that enhance learning without increasing stress.

**4. Focus on Family Engagement and Enrollment Growth** Strong schools attract families. A long-term plan should include marketing the strengths of Avery County Schools, improving family engagement, and making the district a destination for both educators and families.

**5. Build Long-Term Financial and Leadership Resilience** Finally, success means planning beyond individuals. This includes leadership development, succession planning, and maintaining reserves and capital plans that protect the system during future challenges.

In short, the next phase moves from **stability to opportunity**, ensuring Avery County Schools are not just sustainable—but thriving.

## **Policy & 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?**

### **Competitive Compensation**

- I understand that we compare salaries, hourly wages and benefits to neighboring districts, but just like we aren't Mitchell, Yancey, Watauga, Catawba, etc, they are also not Avery. We must also consider the COL differences here compared to those other areas and our goal should not be to be on level with the market, we must be better. If not, we will continue losing our best people to neighboring districts because they can make the same money and afford to live there. Our houses, rent, gas, groceries, etc are more expensive locally.
- Prioritize closing gaps through sustainable, long-term budgeting and prioritizing taking care of our employees
- Consider targeted incentives for hard-to-fill positions, updated Salary Administration Plan

### **Improved Working Conditions**

- Support manageable class sizes, planning time, and instructional support for teachers
- Address bus driver challenges such as split shifts, route design, paid training, and safe equipment and better pay for those that drive both shifts, drive difficult routes, and are committed to our kids and our system. Again, updated Salary Admin Plan.
- Promote professional respect and inclusion for all staff

### **Recruitment and Retention**

- Invest in strong onboarding and mentoring programs
- Support staff professional development plans to assist them along their career path. Tie to longevity goals with a timeline that they must remain in the system or a payback will be required.
- Recognize employee contributions, celebrate wins and encourage/value feedback whether positive or

### **constructive Accountability and Planning**

- Monitor vacancy and turnover/exit interview data regularly

- Use data to guide decisions and track progress
- Commit to long-term solutions rather than short-term fixes

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

- I have mixed feelings just looking at School Report Card Data, test scores and other black and white information. Outside of that, I think that our system has some incredible employees from Principals and bus drivers to educators and custodians. I cannot speak educationally around what hurdles these folks face to serve their kids most effectively, because I haven't personally asked. I intend to.
- A few schools have earned strong performance grades and proficiency levels and the district as a whole appears to be performing at or near the state averaging in core subjects. Also, some schools have met or exceeded expected academic growth, which is a key indicator that instructional strategies are producing results even where proficiency levels remain a challenge.
- I think it is obvious, based upon some of these questions that there are gaps between our elementary and middle schools. The report cards show it clearly. Even though growth is occurring, there is a lack of equity and consistency across the system. An opportunity for improvement. I believe we have incredible people throughout the system but we also need to acknowledge a clear opportunity to strengthen outcomes across all schools. It starts with the Board.

## **How I Would Work with Administrators to Improve Student Outcomes**

I would focus on collaborative, data-driven improvement grounded in School Report Card metrics, Principal and Staff Feedback:

- **Use School Report Card Data as a Continuous Improvement Tool**

Work with administrators to regularly review performance grades, proficiency data, and growth indicators, using them as tools to identify strengths, gaps, and effective practices. Then work with leadership to strategize ways to bridge gaps and clear hurdles.

- **Learn High-Performing Schools (acknowledging differences in the communities)**

Partner with principals to understand what is driving success in schools that exceed growth expectations, and support the transfer of those instructional and leadership practices to other campuses.

- **Focus on Growth While Building Proficiency**

While growth data shows progress, long-term success requires improving grade-level proficiency. I would support administrators in aligning interventions, professional development, and instructional resources to move students from growth to mastery.

- **Address Non-Academic Barriers That Affect Achievement**

School Report Card outcomes reflect more than classroom instruction. I would collaborate with administrators and community partners to address factors such as teacher retention, student stability, after-school learning opportunities, and family support, which directly impact academic performance.

- **Maintain High Expectations with Targeted Support**

I would encourage a culture of high expectations paired with realistic supports, ensuring schools have the flexibility and resources needed to respond to their specific data profiles.

## **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?**

### **Targeted Support for Underperforming Schools**

- Use data to identify specific academic gaps
- Ask questions (to parent, teachers, kids, Principals) value the feedback and utilize that information.
- Provide focused resources such as literacy and math interventions, instructional coaching, and extended learning time
- Set clear goals and regularly monitor progress

### **Strong Leadership and Staff Support**

- Invest in leadership development and staff mentoring
- Support stability and consistency in school leadership
- Provide professional development aligned to identified needs

### **Maintain Excellence in Competitive Schools**

- Continue investing in advanced coursework, career pathways, arts, and athletics
- Ensure high-achieving students remain challenged and supported
- Avoid a “one-size-fits-all” approach (understanding that this is much easier said than done and will require much time and effort)

### **Collaboration and Shared Best Practices**

- Encourage schools to share effective strategies
- Align curriculum and expectations across the district
- Promote a culture of continuous improvement
- Utilize non profit partners in our area that can assist with staff support, tutoring, mentoring, out of school support, etc

### **Equity and Accountability**

- Direct resources based on student need
- Hold the system accountable for growth across all schools (This should be a Key Performance Indicator for the next Superintendent)
- Focus on raising outcomes for every student, not lowering standards

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

### **Embed Support into the School Day**

- Provide access to mentoring, counseling, and social-emotional support during regular school hours. Another opportunity to partner with local non-profits who specialize in this work.
- Identify and reduce barriers so students do not have to choose between academic instruction and needed services

### **Early Identification and Intervention**

- Use data to identify academic, behavioral, and attendance concerns early
- Implement targeted interventions before students fall significantly behind

### **Whole-Child Approach**

- Address academic needs alongside mental health, social, and emotional well-being
- Ensure schools have adequate counselors, social workers, and support staff and/or they are partnering with a local non profit that specializes in this work.

### **Mentorship and Trusted Relationships**

- Expand mentoring programs that connect students with caring adults
- Partner with community organizations to provide additional role models and supports

## **Family and Community Engagement**

- Strengthen communication and partnerships with families • Connect students and families to community-based resources when needed

## **Equity-Focused Resource Allocation**

- Direct additional resources to schools and students with the greatest needs without taking away from others.
- Hold the system accountable for measurable improvement in student outcomes (another Key Performance Indicator for the new Superintendent)

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

First, sometimes it needs to just be ok to go build a snowman, jump ramps on a sled and be a kid.

### **Pros**

- Maintains instructional continuity and reduces the need for calendar extensions
- Keeps students and staff off unsafe roads during severe weather
- Helps preserve instructional pacing and testing schedules

### **Cons**

- Unequal access to internet and technology, especially in rural and mountain areas
- Lower engagement for younger students and those needing additional support
- Added supervision demands on working families
- Challenges in delivering services for students with special needs • Single parent households, parents with multiple children, children living with grandparents are all immediately disadvantaged.

## **Family and Student Impact**

- As a parent, I have witnessed the negative stress this process has placed on children and working families. Kids shouldn't be at the table crying over a large packet of homework or fear that they are going to be counted absent or punished because parents still have to work on remote days.
- Remote learning expectations during weather events increase anxiety and reduce the effectiveness of learning.

## **Ways to Improve the Process**

- Seek direct feedback from teachers, families and students about their experiences
- Review whether remote learning days are the best option not only for the calendar, but for the students and families we are entrusted to serve
- Use that feedback to refine expectations, supports, and limits on remote learning days

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

### **Set Clear, Balanced Expectations**

- Establish high instructional standards aligned with state and district goals
- Emphasize learning and growth, not just test performance

### **Support Before Accountability**

- Provide strong professional development, coaching, and mentoring
- Ensure teachers have the tools and time needed to improve practice

### **Use Data Responsibly**

- Use multiple measures of performance, not test scores alone
- Avoid high-stakes, score-driven practices that shift pressure onto

students

### **Protect Student Well-Being**

- Ensure accountability systems do not pass the stress of scores onto students
- Promote healthy learning environments that value curiosity, confidence, and growth

### **Fair and Transparent Evaluation**

- Maintain consistent, growth-focused evaluation processes
- Clearly communicate expectations and improvement pathways

### **Continuous Improvement**

- Encourage collaboration and sharing of effective practices
- Recognize excellence and professional growth across schools

## **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?**

### **Clear, Consistent Communication**

- Share Board decisions, priorities, and rationales in plain, accessible language
- Communicate early and often—especially around changes that affect students, staff, or families

### **Multiple Communication Channels**

- Use a mix of meetings, digital platforms, and written updates to reach parents, educators, and taxpayers
- Ensure information is accessible to all families, including those with limited internet access

## **Two-Way Engagement**

- Actively seek feedback from parents, students, staff, and the community
- Provide meaningful opportunities for public input before major decisions are finalized

## **Transparency in Decision-Making**

- Explain how data, policy, and community feedback inform Board actions
- Clearly outline goals, timelines, and measures of success

## **Build Trust Through Follow-Through**

- Report back to the community on progress and outcomes
- Acknowledge challenges openly and adjust when needed

## **Respect and Professionalism**

- Foster respectful dialogue, even when perspectives differ
- Model openness, accountability, and a shared commitment to students

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

Balancing the budget while meeting the needs of students, teachers, and families requires discipline, transparency, and a clear set of priorities. The Board's role is not simply to cut costs, but to ensure that limited resources are used where they have the greatest impact.

First, the Board should prioritize **people and safety**. Funding that supports student experience and safety, staff recruitment and retention, and basic operational needs should come first. Stable staffing and safe learning environments are foundational to student achievement and reduce long-term costs associated with turnover, substitutes, and crisis response.

Second, the Board should focus on **long-term planning over short-term**

**fixes.** This includes multi-year budgeting, realistic enrollment projections, and responsible capital planning. Investing in preventative maintenance and infrastructure reduces expensive emergency repairs and instructional disruptions down the road.

Third, the Board should actively seek **partnerships, grants, and alternative funding sources** to stretch local dollars further. Collaborating with county leaders, nonprofits, and state and federal partners can help offset costs in areas like student support services, after-school programming, and capital improvements.

In terms of funding more or less, I believe we should continue to invest more in **staff compensation, student mental health supports, and safe, functional facilities**, while carefully reviewing administrative overhead, duplicative programs, and initiatives that do not directly support students or classrooms.

Ultimately, a balanced budget should reflect our values: responsible stewardship of taxpayer dollars while doing our best to serve students, families, and staff well.

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

#### **Set Vision and Expectations (in partnership with school leadership)**

- Establish the district's educational vision, goals, and priorities • Ensure curriculum aligns with state standards and community values

#### **Approve, Not Micromanage**

- Approve curriculum frameworks and major adoptions
- Avoid directing day-to-day instructional methods, which are the role of educators

#### **Ensure Equity and Rigor**

- Expect consistent, high-quality curriculum across all schools • Support access to rigorous and relevant learning opportunities for all students

## **Use Data and Outcomes**

- Review student achievement data and curriculum effectiveness • Ask informed questions to ensure curriculum supports student learning

## **Support Professional Expertise**

- Rely on teachers and administrators to design and implement curriculum
- Encourage professional collaboration and evidence-based practices

## **Engage the Community when Creating Strategic Plans and Development**

- Provide transparency around curriculum decisions
- Create opportunities for stakeholder input while keeping decisions student-centered

# **School Climate & 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?**

## **Zero Tolerance for Bullying**

- Bullying of all types will be addressed promptly and consistently • Ensure fair, age-appropriate consequences paired with corrective support

## **Mental Health as a Core Priority**

- Treat student mental health with the same importance as academic achievement

- Advocate for adequate counseling, social work, and mental health resources

### **Trauma-Informed and Compassionate Practices**

- Recognize that students and staff have endured COVID and a once-in a-lifetime natural disaster in Hurricane Helene
- Support trauma-informed approaches that promote healing and resilience

### **Exercise and Physical Activity**

- Recognize physical activity as a critical support for mental health, focus, and academic improvement
- Support strong physical education programs, recess, movement breaks, and extracurricular athletics
- Encourage healthy outlets for stress and emotional regulation

### **Positive School Climate and Prevention**

- Support evidence-based bullying prevention and school climate programs
- Emphasize education, prevention, and restorative practices alongside accountability

### **Teaching Respect, Consent, and Safety**

- Support age-appropriate instruction that reinforces respect, consent, empathy, and personal responsibility

### **Board Leadership and Community Partnership**

- Set clear expectations through policy and oversight
- Encourage collaboration with families and community partners to support student well-being

## **15. How would you foster mental health across schools**

## **among students and staff, including using a trauma-informed approach toward wellness?**

I shared some of this in the last questions but I would like to

### **see: Make Mental Health a Shared Priority**

- Treat mental health and wellness as essential to learning and job performance
- Recognize that students and staff cannot thrive academically or professionally if their mental health needs are unmet

### **Adopt a Trauma-Informed Framework**

- Acknowledge the lasting impacts of COVID and the once-in-a-lifetime natural disaster from Hurricane Helene
- Train staff to recognize trauma responses and respond with empathy, consistency, and appropriate support

### **Embed Supports Into the School Day**

- Ensure access to counselors, social workers, and mental health professionals
- Integrate social-emotional learning, coping skills, and wellness practices into daily routines

### **Support Staff Wellness**

- Recognize that staff have experienced trauma alongside students • Promote reasonable workloads, access to support resources, and a culture where asking for help is encouraged

### **Promote Physical Activity and Healthy Outlets**

- Support physical education, recess, movement breaks, and extracurricular activities
- Recognize exercise as a key tool for reducing stress, improving focus, and supporting emotional regulation
- Access to and investment in options for staff to have access to opportunities to live healthier lifestyles.

## **Create Safe, Supportive School Cultures**

- Foster environments where students and staff feel safe, respected, and valued
- Encourage positive relationships, trust, and clear expectations

## **Use Data and Feedback**

- Regularly review school climate data and seek feedback from students, families, and staff
- Adjust supports based on what is working and where additional help is needed

## **16. How would you increase language learning resources not only for the benefit of Latino students but to help with bilingualism among native English-speaking students so they can engage with their Latino classmates and community around them?**

### **Bilingualism as a Long-Term Asset**

- Recognize bilingualism as a valuable skill that strengthens academic success, communication, and career readiness
- Prepare students for college, the workforce, and a more connected global economy

### **Community and Demographic Relevance**

- Value Spanish as a key language for engaging with Avery County's growing Latino population
- Use language learning to strengthen relationships across cultures within our community

### **Support Multilingual Learners**

- Ensure strong English language support and access to bilingual staff and instructional resources
- Remove barriers so multilingual students can fully participate and

succeed

### **Expand Language Learning for All Students**

- Increase access to Spanish and world language instruction at earlier grade levels
- Encourage shared learning opportunities between native English speaking students and Latino classmates

### **Board Leadership**

- Support staffing, professional development, and long-term planning aligned with Avery County's needs

## **17. How would you promote inclusivity, respect and equity among all students... while honoring the local culture of Avery County?**

### **Set Clear Expectations for Respect**

- Promote a school culture where all students are treated with dignity and respect, regardless of socioeconomic, cultural, racial, or religious background
- Ensure policies are applied fairly and consistently

### **Equity Through Opportunity**

- Direct resources and supports based on student need, not a one-size fits-all approach
- Ensure all students have access to strong academics, extracurriculars, and enrichment opportunities

### **Culturally Responsive Education**

- Support curriculum and instruction that reflect a modern, multicultural world
- Teach students to understand and respect perspectives different from their own

## **Honor Avery County's Local Culture**

- Celebrate the history, traditions, and values of Avery County within the curriculum
- Highlight local voices, heritage, and community contributions alongside broader perspectives

## **Build Understanding Through Relationships**

- Encourage dialogue, collaboration, and shared experiences among students
- Support activities that bring students from different backgrounds together

## **Prepare Students for the Future**

- Ensure students graduate with the cultural awareness, empathy, and skills needed for college, careers, and civic life

## **Board's Role**

- Set inclusive policies, monitor outcomes, and engage the community in ongoing conversation

# **18. How should the school system engage parents and community stakeholders in decision making?**

## **Early and Transparent Communication**

- Share information clearly and early, before decisions are finalized
- Explain the reasoning behind decisions in plain, accessible language

## **Create Meaningful Two-Way Engagement**

- Provide opportunities for parents, educators, students, and community members to give input
- Use surveys, forums, listening sessions, and advisory groups to gather diverse perspectives

## **Meet Families Where They Are**

- Offer multiple ways to engage, including in-person and virtual options
- Be mindful of work schedules, transportation, and language access

## **Value Community Expertise**

- Recognize parents and community members as partners in student success
- Involve local non profit organizations, faith groups, and businesses where appropriate

## **Close the Feedback Loop**

- Report back on what was heard and how input influenced decisions
- Be honest when certain suggestions cannot be implemented and explain why

## **Build Trust Through Consistency**

- Maintain regular communication, not just during times of conflict
- Foster a culture of respect, listening, and shared responsibility

## **Board's Role**

- Set expectations for engagement, transparency, and accountability
- Model open, respectful dialogue with the community

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

### **Acknowledge and Validate Concerns**

- Recognize that frustration often comes from feeling unheard or under informed
- Commit to listening respectfully and thoughtfully

## **Improve Communication and Access**

- Share information clearly, consistently, and in plain language
- Use appropriate, official communication channels to ensure accuracy and transparency

## **Create Meaningful Opportunities for Input**

- Provide structured opportunities such as public forums, surveys, and listening sessions
- Encourage participation that is constructive and solution-focused

## **Set Clear Expectations for Respectful Engagement**

- Maintain a zero-tolerance approach to loud, boisterous, or disrespectful behavior
- Foster civil dialogue so all voices can be heard in a safe and respectful environment

## **Establish Professional Communication Boundaries**

- Communicate that Board-related concerns should be raised through formal channels
- Do not engage in personal communication about school matters through social media platforms

## **Close the Feedback Loop**

- Report back on what was heard and how input informed decisions
- Be transparent when constraints limit possible outcomes

## **Build Trust Through Consistency**

- Demonstrate follow-through, accountability, and professionalism

## **Local & Practical Concerns**

## **20. Often, school bus routes become more limited because of adverse weather. How would you promote accessibility at school... especially following adverse winter?**

### **Acknowledge the Reality**

- Recognize that adverse winter weather already creates transportation challenges in Avery County
- Acknowledge that damage from Hurricane Helene has made road conditions and access even more difficult

### **Safety First**

- Prioritize the safety of students and drivers when roads are icy, damaged, or unsafe
- This policy should include staff by looking at reporting policies due to travel concerns.
- Support transportation decisions based on real-time road conditions

### **Equity and Access**

- Understand that students have varying levels of road accessibility, especially in rural and remote areas. Students and families also have varying elevation changes and weather differs greatly.
- Avoid one-size-fits-all transportation decisions that disproportionately affect certain families. This is a very complex issue that will take much time and effort to address.

### **Flexible, Short-Term Solutions**

- Much of what is already done. Consider alternative pickup points, delayed starts, or partial routes when full routes are not possible
- Communicate changes clearly and as early as possible.

### **Academic Flexibility**

- Support reasonable flexibility with attendance and assignments when transportation is limited

- Ensure students are not penalized for circumstances beyond their control

## **Ongoing Community Input**

- Acknowledge this is a complex issue that will require thoughtful planning and continued input from families, drivers, and staff •
- View these ideas as initial steps, not final solutions

## **Board Role**

- Commit to continued discussion, data review, and community engagement to improve access over time

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

The most pressing challenges facing Avery County Schools in no particular order are failing school infrastructure and capital improvement needs, declining enrollment and funding, underpaid staff with continually rising expectations, and frequent turnover in the superintendent role. These challenges have been intensified by the long-term effects of COVID and the damage caused by Hurricane Helene.

### **Ideas to Address the Challenges**

#### **• Stabilize Leadership**

- Prioritize continuity and support for district leadership to allow for long-term planning
- Reduce disruption by establishing clear expectations and consistent Board support

#### **• Address Infrastructure and Capital Needs**

- Develop and communicate a long-term capital improvement plan focused on safety and functionality
- Be transparent with the community about priorities and funding needs

#### **• Respond to Declining Enrollment and Funding**

- Focus on recruiting and retaining families through strong academics, student supports, and clear communication
- Use responsible, transparent budgeting aligned with district priorities and hold leaders accountable for the approved budget. •

### **Support and Retain Staff**

- Address compensation challenges and workload expectations
- Invest in professional support, mental health resources, and respect for staff

### **• Advocate for a Stronger County and Community Collaboration**

#### **(Have to do more than say "We Are Avery")**

- Encourage county commissioners and candidates to adopt a more collaborative attitude when looking at County operations, budgeting and priorities.
- Leverage partnerships with nonprofits, community organizations, and other agencies to help reduce financial strain that will free up County resources where to support the most urgent needs in schools and the broader community (healthcare, public safety, EMS, DSS, Senior Programs)

These challenges are complex, but through stable leadership, collaboration, and shared responsibility, Avery County Schools can move toward a more sustainable future.

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

### **• Value All Pathways Equally**

- Support early college, college prep, vocational, technical, and trade pathways
- Reintroduce and prioritize the skilled trades as respected, viable career options

### **• Early College and College Partnerships**

- Continue to strengthen early college opportunities
- Expand and deepen partnerships with Mayland Community College for dual enrollment, certifications, and career pathways •

### **Strengthen and Expand the Trades**

- Invest in programs such as construction, electrical, HVAC, automotive, welding, and healthcare support

- Support apprenticeships, certifications, and paid work-based learning

- **Career Awareness Starts Early**

- Introduce students to college, technical, and trade options before high school
- Normalize all postsecondary pathways

- **Remove Barriers to Access**

- Address transportation, scheduling, and cost challenges
- Ensure equitable access for all students

- **Board's Role**

- Set priorities, allocate resources, and support long-term planning
- Align programs with local workforce needs to help students stay and succeed in Avery County

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

- **Plan Proactively**

- Use enrollment, demographic, and funding data to anticipate change
- Commit to multi-year, strategic planning rather than short-term reactions

- **Align Resources With Student Needs**

- Adjust staffing, programs, and supports based on need and equity
- Maintain high expectations and protect student services

- **Protect Educational Quality and Stability**

- Minimize disruption to students and staff
- Prioritize leadership continuity and staff retention

- **Transparency and Community Engagement**

- Communicate openly about challenges, trade-offs, and decisions
- Seek meaningful input from families, staff, and community stakeholders

- **Creative and Collaborative Solutions**

- Leverage partnerships, grants, and shared services to stretch limited resources
- Work collaboratively with county leaders and community

organizations

- **Advocacy Beyond the County**

- Actively advocate at the state and federal levels for appropriations that:
  - Support essential academic and student support programs
  - Fund needed infrastructure and capital improvements
  - Improve student outcomes and staff recruitment, retention, and performance

- **Board's Role**

- Set priorities, provide oversight, and ensure long-term sustainability
- Balance fiscal responsibility with the obligation to serve students well

## **Personal/Values Questions**

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

At home, I tell my kids that their job is to be their best self—not to measure themselves against anyone else. I ask them what they expect of themselves, what their goals are, and what their dreams are. My role as a dad is to help make those goals as realistic and achievable as possible.

That same philosophy applies to how I define success for students in Avery County Schools. Academic growth, achievement, graduation rates, and career readiness all matter—but none of those are more important than helping a child become their best self. Success means students who feel safe, supported, and valued; who are growing academically and personally; and who are developing confidence, character, and purpose.

When students are encouraged to set goals, believe in themselves, and are given the support they need to grow, academic success follows. Our responsibility as a school system is to meet students where they are, support their individual paths, and remove barriers that stand in their way.

The metrics we use should reflect that whole-child approach—academic growth, graduation, engagement, well-being, and readiness for life beyond school. But at the core, success is measured by whether our students leave

our schools believing in themselves and prepared to pursue their own goals and dreams.

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

It is easy to complain or put down what others have done when you haven't been in their shoes. As I said earlier, I am not one to complain. I would need to be in the position, read all the minutes and be ingrained in the decision making process before I criticize anyone for anything. At the end of the day, if I were to win, we would need to start off with a positive relationship. Not one telling someone all of the things they did wrong or could have done differently.

If elected, I would focus less on what past or current Board members have done wrong and more on how I would approach the role differently going forward.

- First, I would prioritize stronger collaboration and stability. That means working to support consistent district leadership, reducing unnecessary disruption, and focusing on long-term planning rather than short-term reactions.
- Second, I would place a greater emphasis on listening and two-way communication. I want families, staff, and community members to feel informed, heard, and respected. That includes seeking input early, communicating clearly, and closing the feedback loop so people understand how their voices matter—while also maintaining clear expectations for respectful engagement.
- Third, I would advocate more aggressively for people-first decision making. That means recognizing the realities our students and staff face after COVID, Hurricane Helene, staffing shortages, and funding challenges—and ensuring mental health, working conditions, and student well-being are central to Board decisions.
- I would also push for stronger collaboration beyond the school system, including working with county leaders, nonprofits, and partners to help address infrastructure, funding, and student support needs.

- Finally, I would bring a parent-centered perspective to the Board. My decisions would always come back to one question: Does this help our students become their best selves and strengthen the future of Avery County Schools?

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

Ensuring decisions are student-centered while respecting taxpayer interests is something I practice every day in my professional role. In my job, I am accountable to multiple stakeholders—DPI in Raleigh, the State of North Carolina, funders, YMCA members, and community partners—all of whom expect transparency, responsible use of resources, and measurable outcomes as we work to serve our communities.

I bring that same approach to Board service. I believe student centered decisions begin with a clear understanding of how an action directly benefits students' learning, safety, or well-being. At the same time, I recognize the responsibility to be a good steward of public funds by prioritizing needs, planning for long-term sustainability, and avoiding short term solutions that create future financial strain.

Transparency is key. I support clear reporting, open communication, and accountability so taxpayers understand how resources are being used and why certain investments are necessary. I also believe strongly in leveraging partnerships, grants, and outside funding to stretch local dollars further whenever possible.

Ultimately, strong schools and responsible fiscal management are not competing goals. When decisions are thoughtful, data-informed, and grounded in service to the community, we honor both our students and the taxpayers who invest in their success.

### **One More Thought**

I wanted to stay within the 250 character parameters to the above

questions but wanted to be sure my thoughts on this were included.

We have the ability to partner with local organizations to make housing more affordable for educators. I believe that we should engage these organizations to advocate on behalf of our educators and champion the outcomes that workforce housing would provide our system.

Workforce housing partnerships help Avery County Schools attract and retain quality educators, stabilize classrooms, and improve student outcomes—efficiently and sustainably.

## **How Workforce Housing Partnerships Benefit Avery County Schools**

### **1. Stronger Teacher Recruitment**

Affordable housing makes Avery County competitive for educators despite salary constraints, expanding applicant pools and helping fill hard-to-staff positions.

### **2. Improved Teacher Retention**

Teachers with stable, nearby housing are more likely to stay, reducing turnover, recruitment costs, and disruption to students.

### **3. Better Student Outcomes**

Housing stability lowers educator stress and commute time, leading to greater engagement, continuity, and stronger student-teacher relationships.

### **4. Greater Community Connection**

Teachers who live locally are more involved in after-school programs, mentoring, and community life—strengthening school culture.

### **5. Cost-Effective Strategy**

Housing partnerships leverage grants and nonprofit resources, delivering long-term benefits without relying solely on ongoing salary increases.

### **6. Regional Competitive Advantage**

Becoming known as a district where teachers can afford to live positions Avery County ahead of neighboring systems.

### **7. Positive Public & Stakeholder Support**

Housing initiatives signal innovation and care for educators, building goodwill with families, local government, and funders.