


**Chapel Hill - Carrboro NAACP
2019 School Board Candidate Questionnaire**

Please type out your responses in full below; take as much space as you need to answer the question in full. We thank you in advance for your participation.

Full Name:	Andrew Davidson
Age/Race/Gender (with preferred pronouns):	45, white, male
Occupation/Title/Retired:	Database Engineer, IBM
Relationship to school district/particular school(s)	Married, father of two sons, one at Carrboro High School, one at Smith Middle
Headshot Photograph (published with your questionnaire responses):	

Background

Please provide an overview of your local civic leadership/organizational affiliations (please describe, in particular, your engagement with the local school system and local educational advocacy). What specific insights into our local community have you garnered from this work? In what ways has this work motivated you to campaign for school board membership? Please describe, in particular, your engagement with the local school system and local educational advocacy.

I served for three years on the SIT at FPG Elementary, including one year as chair, from 2009 to 2012. I served for four years on the CHCCS Board, including one as vice chair, from 2013 to 2017. And I have served on the Special Needs Advisory Council (SNAC) since 2017, and currently serve as the Chair.

My experience is that we have a highly engaged community of parents in this community who have high expectations of our leaders. One of the challenges I see is that school officials sometimes have difficulty engaging with parent groups and advisory councils, because they have a “territorial” instinct, and don’t wish to be told how to do their jobs by unpaid parents and volunteers. This can create distrust and frustration between the two groups that can get worse over time. I see it from both sides – people who are in paid positions don’t feel comfortable taking direction from parents who they don’t report to, and whose involvement can be sporadic. And parents get frustrated because they see real problems on the ground, they have time, energy, and expertise, and they can feel shut out.

There are two pillars that can improve that relationship: communication and trust. When it comes to communication, it is important for both sides to understand that the first rule of communication is to seek to understand *before* seeking to be understood – to listen first. And trust comes from school officials and parents or advisory groups working together and building on that communication.

My experience with SNAC, in particular, is one where I can point to a track record of effective collaboration with Dr. Lessley Mader, the Director of Exceptional Children. We have worked together, along with dozens of parents, to help improve the lives of Special Needs and all students in the district. In the past five years, SNAC has helped bring more than \$918,000 to the district, and has introduced programs like Peer Buddies that have extended beyond just special needs children. I of course don’t take credit for this work – it was the tireless work of literally dozens of special needs parents who came before me – but it’s an example of how schools and parents can collaborate to improve educational outcomes for students. And unfortunately, in the past two years, I know that parent input and advisory councils have been targeted for reduced engagement, to the detriment of our students, and as a board member I want to reverse that trend.

**Racial Disparities in Academic and Disciplinary Outcomes;
Application of the REIA & Racial Equity Analysis**

1. The racial achievement gap on test scores in CHCCS is the second largest in the state and one of the largest in the U.S. (e.g., in school year 2017-2018, 83.8% of White students in grades 3-8 scored "College and Career Ready" on EOG exams, as compared to only 29.4% of Black students, and 37.3% of Latinx students)¹. In fact, according to the recent [Racial Equity Report Card](#), CHCCS, one of the wealthiest school districts in the state, ranks #47 compared to other districts in terms of the academic outcomes of our Black students.

a. What is your explanation for this large achievement gap and our relatively poor performance in the education of our Black students?

It starts with: an income gap that gives students of wealthier families a leg up from day one, since they have expanded access to outside resources; and it's perpetuated by a discipline gap at schools that shows that African American students are eight times more likely to be given suspensions. (Special needs students are fourteen times more likely to be given suspensions.)

b. What proposals do you have for reducing these achievement disparities and poor academic performance outcomes?

- Eliminate out of school suspension for all infractions except bringing a gun to school.
- Continue to support and strengthen the Blue Ribbon Mentor Advocate Program, and AVID programs.
- Defend the blending of regular and honors classrooms at the high school level.
- Continue to focus on reading proficiency at the 3rd grade level.
- Expand gifted opportunities to the middle schools beyond LEAP, especially in math, and continue to support and target minority students for these programs.
- Support and target minority students for AP classes at the high school level.
- Not give up even in years when the results are discouraging.

c. In what ways should our school system be evaluated according to its ability to reduce these disparities?

My guiding principle has always been "growth for every student". One of the deficiencies that I KNOW we face from my experience on the board is that our Data Science capabilities are stuck in the 20th century, and it hinders our ability to evaluate students and target them for growth until it's too late – I have sat with the administrator who is responsible for managing all of our data tools, and they are stuck using outdated, unsophisticated tools, and thus creating all of our data sets by hand; and they are bottleneck and a single point of failure for all things related to student data. And it's not their fault! It's because our district has failed

¹ Id.

to keep up and invest in a Data Warehouse system that is current to the year 2019. I won't vote for a budget that doesn't include investment in such a system.

And I can imagine what the reader of this might be thinking – we asked you about evaluating the school system for their ability to reduce racial disparities, and you answered about Data Warehouses! But I can tell you from experience, based on the adage “you can't manage what you don't measure”, that our district does not currently have the Data Science capabilities to effectively address this problem. Once it's in place, it will enable administrators and teachers at every single level to evaluate and teach students who today we are not reaching.

- d. Which group, students, teachers or administrators, is most responsible for current academic achievement outcomes in CHCCS? Why?

I think the answer is “all of the above” – students learn both in the classroom and out. They start kindergarten with different levels of readiness. They receive different levels of enrichment during the summer and after school. Different populations get different treatment from teachers and administrators. The way students interact with each other affects their learning, and their educational outcomes. Every educational professional I have worked with says that values that a school system wishes to instill in both its teachers and staff, or in its students, has to also be communicated to community groups – like sports leagues or community centers, for example. That's why I think it's so important for our district to open its minds and hearts to the outside groups and see them not as a threat or as people who are meddling in their jobs, but as potential partners in improving the outcomes of all students, but especially the ones who we are under-serving.

2. Data show that each year, students of color in CHCCS, and particularly Black students, are disproportionately subject to both short and long-term suspensions (e.g., in 2016-2017, Black students in CHCCS were 13.9 times more likely to receive a short-term suspension than White students, and 5.6 times more likely to be referred to a juvenile delinquency court)². While racial disproportionality in discipline is prevalent across the nation, [the NC relative rate index of Black student short-term suspensions compared to White students is 4.4](#), again one of the largest racial inequities in the state.

- a. What is your explanation for the large disproportionate discipline rate in our district?

I can't begin to explain it – I find it beyond unacceptable, and the numbers are also unacceptable for students of special needs.

- b. What proposals do you have for reducing these disparities?

- Eliminate out of school suspensions for all infractions except bringing a gun to school.

² <http://www.southerncoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/2018-RERC-Chapel-Hill-Carborro.pdf>

- Continue to train teachers how to better engage with specifically: African American students (and African American boys) and special needs students so these students don't have to suffer any longer.
- Improve our Data Science capabilities so we can spot these trends earlier – during the school year, not a year later, and address them with training and interventions.
- DON'T CUT POSITIONS FOR BEHAVIOR SPECIALISTS.

3. The [Racial Equity Impact Assessment](#) was recommended as a tool to guide the district's decision-making about current policy and new initiatives. What are your views about the usefulness of this tool for our district? What aspects of the tool do you think are most important?

I think this description – “*REIA's are used to inform decisions, much like environmental impact statements, fiscal impact reports and workplace risk assessments*” – is a perfect way to describe how these assessments can be incorporated into the decision making process of the district.

I don't have first-hand experience with REIA's, but from what I read, they don't hurt, and can potentially improve any new program or initiative the district enacts. I would also be inclined to do post-implementation reviews and comparisons and “lessons learned” sessions to identify what is most successful.

4. Have you attended Racial Equity Institute (REI) training or any other racial equity trainings in the past three years? (Note: This training is not the same as diversity or cultural competence training.) If so, what have been your key “lessons learned” about how to approach racial inequities in our school system?

I have attended the REI Phase I workshop two different times, once in 2014, and again in 2019 with my high school son. In both workshops – which five years apart had different sets of lessons and tools used – from a high level, I learned about a history of racism in this country that you wouldn't learn from a typical high school or college course.

There's one specific example from the 2019 session: one of the instructors detailed a study based on a video game. The game was simple: the user was given a virtual gun, with the instruction to shoot virtual perps on the screen with a weapon in their hand, and hold their fire when they had no weapon. Users from the general population were *terrible* – they were trigger happy, and more likely to shoot unarmed victims of color.

How did the police do, they asked? Based on what I read, I said, “worse”. The answer was, the police did much better, and it's because of training. The police are trained to hold their fire, they're trained to recognize their biases, and act correctly.

The lesson learned? We can train bias out of our teachers and staff. We all have it. The goal is: understand the historical basis of racism and racially biased outcomes; acknowledge bias and understand it; and produce effective training for teachers and staff that improve outcomes for students.

Academic Tracking and Special Programs for Academically/Intellectually Gifted

1. Please provide your assessment of the LEAP program, as conceived and as currently implemented.

Both of my sons have been LEAP students. My 10th grader absolutely needed LEAP, like as a special need, and had great difficulties in a traditional classroom. My 7th grader does well in it, but would do just as well in a traditional classroom.

One of the problems that families currently face is: for gifted education, it's "LEAP or nothing" – because the district doesn't provide much support for gifted students otherwise. So parents go to great lengths to get their kids in – including sending them to Denver to prep for testing!

So the first problem is: without LEAP, there's no gifted support. The idea of bringing tangible gifted education to the middle schools is the next step – it can broaden access, and reduce the pressure on families who feel it's "LEAP or nothing". My viewpoint: when it comes to curriculum, it's Math where this can be the most effective. One of the risks you have in broadening access is – how do you do it in such a way that you're not just tracking at the middle school level? I think that providing pathways for accelerated math at middle school, in the same fashion as in LEAP, is the best course of action.

2. What is your opinion about other initiatives that sort and divide children into academically and intellectually gifted in elementary and middle school and into "Honors" vs. "Standard" in high school?

I touched on this a little bit earlier: I think that Math I pretty cut and dried – either you can advance to the next math course, or you stay in the previous one. At the middle school level, I think that creating two tracks is detrimental to students, and I don't think it provides tangible outcomes the way that accelerating math coursework does.

At the high school level, I think that blending regular and honors students into the same classroom is the best way to split the difference between, on the one side, high achieving students who are college bound and want more challenging coursework, and students who don't want to be segregated into standard courses.

and receive substandard education. In fact, the high school I attended – Evanston Township High School in Evanston, Illinois, had blended courses just like this.

Faculty/Staff Diversity & Equity

1. Please provide your assessment of the current state of CHCCS faculty and staff diversity. Do you think faculty and staff diversity is important? Please discuss why, or why not. If you see room for improvement in faculty and staff diversity, what specific proposals do you have to address the issue?

First of all, in the sense that I see all of our issues first through the lens of the student, I think that students do best when they see adults who they can identify with, so I think it's important that we hire teachers and administrators that are representative of our student body.

I think we've done a decent job in some respects – there is improved African American teacher and administrator representation.

Something that has changed in our district as compared to 30 years ago is that we are now “diverse in our diversity” – we have sizable Latino, Chinese, and Burmese populations, in addition to African American students. So I would continue to emphasize all of these student populations when focusing on this issue.

2. List possible faculty/staff equity-related policies or best practices that could be introduced and implemented in CHCCS to improve outcomes?

I am going to cite the district's long-range plan on Employee Experience in this answer:

1. Actively recruit and retain a workforce that is diverse and represents the population of our students and families.

EE 1.1 Source, recruit and hire local, regional and national talent for certified, classified and leadership positions. Recruitment efforts include an intentional focus on strengthening existing partnerships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and other institutions serving People of Color, as well as on the development of new partnerships and professional relationships.

EE 1.2 Principals and other hiring managers give equitable consideration to candidates from underrepresented demographic groups when making hiring decisions, specifically for certified positions, and are prepared to share with Human Resources and/or leadership, the names of diverse candidates considered for vacancies.

These are worthy goals. And I wholeheartedly support them. But there's something missing – retention! And right now, this district has a serious turnover

problem, at the administrator level as well as at the teacher level. I will work to add retention language and goals to our district's long-range plan.

Dual Language Programs

1. Please provide your assessment of our school system's dual language programs.
 - a. How do the District's dual language programs help to *improve* inequities in academic achievement?

I don't know if I can say that they do – specifically, the Spanish program is designed to address the achievement gap for Latinx students, but I don't think the data shows that it is doing that, and data also shows that improvements don't show up until high school, so they're hard to measure.

When it comes to Mandarin, again, I don't know if the existence of a Mandarin program can measurably be shown to improve the achievement gap.

- b. How do dual language programs *contribute* to inequities in academic achievement?

Similar to my previous answer, I don't think they help or hurt the achievement gap.

- c. How can dual language programs, in their current state and resource allocation, help to close the achievement gap?

I think the most optimistic outcomes are: improved educational outcomes for Latinx students; and, with recruitment for African American students, an expanded set of opportunities that get students excited for school that improves their educational experience. But I don't think it makes a big difference.

- d. If unsuccessful in meeting metrics for closing the achievement gap, should resources allocated toward dual language programs be diverted to other programs with greater potential and a demonstrated track record in addressing inequities in achievement? Why or why not?

I emphatically do not. First of all, I am a proponent of language acquisition, and from a young age – as Americans we do a terrible job of learning second languages. (Myself, I speak French and Dutch, both at CEFR somewhere between A2 and B1).

My position is that DL programs should be as close to cost neutral as possible – and if they are, then there are no resources to “divert” to other programs. I think it creates a divisive atmosphere in our district to say that we should eliminate one program in our district for one set of students and use that money for another set of students. And specifically, I don't support eliminating the Mandarin Program, I don't think it's how we close the achievement gap.

School Safety

1. Please provide your assessment of our current school safety plan, and its implementation.

a. What are your biggest concerns regarding school safety?

My biggest concern is that a gun nut walks into our school and performs a mass shooting.

b. Describe the role of School Resource Officers in our elementary through high schools.

I support SRO's at the middle school and high school levels – I think they keep our schools safe from external threats.

c. Do you believe that School Resource Officers should be armed? Why or why not? If yes, please describe the type of weapon.

Police officers are armed with guns. One of my sons had extensive interactions with an SRO, and the weapon was never an issue. I am agnostic on the issue of the specific weapon type, so I'm not arguing for guns.

d. What concrete changes in school safety policy would you like to see?

I have two issues: 1) keep our kids safe from active shooter scenarios; and 2) don't involve kids, especially vulnerable kids, in the criminal justice system. I want our district to keep training around those issues.

Community Engagement

1. What changes would you suggest in how the school system communicates with parents and other community stakeholders?

a. Please provide your assessment of current levels of transparency and the integrity of process in CHCCS decision-making. In what ways should transparency and accountability to the community be improved?

Having served on the board for four years, I understand more than most how long and boring a school board meeting can be. And we broadcast them! So on the one hand, that's maximum transparency. At the same time, I also recognize that parents (and students) don't want to sit at a board meeting until 11pm on a Thursday night. I do endorse the recent practice of emailing Board Digests that summarize board meetings.

However, I also am disappointed at how the board has behaved over the past year when it comes to integrity and with regard to using emails and inside information to promote specific outcomes that favor one group over another. I bring a track record of integrity to my candidacy for the board.

- b. In what ways can the school board better promote student engagement in school system governance? What are you doing to engage students and student voice in your campaign?

It's challenging – directly engaging students is going to tilt a preference toward high school students, who are going to be far more clear-minded and articulate when it comes to advocating for their positions than middle or elementary schools students.

I am currently representing special needs students as Special Needs Advisory Council chair, many of whom do not have a voice at all.

- c. How would you characterize our school system's readiness to ensure a full and accurate count in the upcoming census?

I don't know enough to comment on that, or to comment on what the school's role is from a statutory standpoint.

Budgeting

1. What should be the priorities for the CHCCS's 2020-2021 budget?

- a. In what ways would they differ from 2019-2020 budget priorities?

I won't vote for a budget that doesn't prioritize modernizing our data science capabilities.

- b. How would you re-prioritize current programs?

Over the past two years I have seen an erosion in the priority of special needs students, and in the allocation of Behavior Specialists, so I would place a priority on maintaining those programs and positions.

- c. What other changes would you like to see in the budgeting process?

We have a relatively new director of finance so I would wait and see how they operate and work with the board before making new recommendations.