



Durham Association of Educators Political Action Committee
Candidate Questionnaire: City of Durham Municipal Elections; Fall 2019 Election Cycle

Please respond to each of the following questions.

1. Provide your name as it will appear on the ballot and the specific elected position you seek.

<i>Name:</i> Jillian Johnson	<i>Position Sought:</i> Durham City Council At-Large
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2. Briefly describe your personal connections to & involvement with public schools in Durham.

My two children are both students in Durham Public Schools. I was active in the PTA and a regular volunteer at my oldest child's elementary school, and expect to be so again when my youngest starts elementary school this fall. I have marched in Raleigh twice in solidarity with Durham's public school teachers and visit DPS schools regularly as a speaker and volunteer for special events.

3. If you are an incumbent, tell us what you feel your most significant contributions have been on Council during your current term. Tell us why you feel your service should be rewarded with another term. Provide specific examples.

In 2017, I outlined five areas of focus for the rest of my city council term.

- 1) Implement a successful participatory budgeting program;
- 2) Enhance the city's support for employee-owned businesses;
- 3) Advance the city's commitment to racial equity;
- 4) Increase the accessibility of city meetings and decision-making;
- 5) Increase youth engagement and expand the number of youth jobs in the city's summer youth jobs program.

I have made progress on each of those goals as follows:

- 1) The City successfully implemented a \$2.4M participatory budgeting program in FY 2019. We achieved our goals for number of ideas, number of budget delegates, and number of voters. We held dozens of outreach events during idea collection and voting, focusing on engaging low-income communities and communities of color. I served as one of two council liaisons to the steering committee and will continue to serve in that role through the next year. Over the next year we'll evaluate the results of the program in partnership with members of the community, and we'll implement any changes that the steering committee, staff, or community members deem necessary.
- 2) Through my national networks with cooperative development organizations, I facilitated the city's involvement with the Shared Equity in Economic Development (SEEDS) fellowship, a



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partnership between the National League of Cities and the Democracy at Work Institute. Through this program, city staff are being trained along with leaders from Atlanta, Miami, and Philadelphia, to help preserve Black-owned businesses by converting them to cooperatives. I will continue to advocate for city support for employee-owned businesses as part of our broader economic development strategy.

3) I successfully advocated for the creation of a race equity task force, which is spending one year developing concrete recommendations for the city and other institutions with regard to advancing racial equity. In order to institutionalize this commitment, the city has established an Office of Equity and Inclusion, which will oversee implementation of these recommendations. We have also prioritized racial equity training for city staff and joined the Government Alliance for Race and Equity, a national organization that helps cities develop and implement race equity plans.

4) I supported Council Member Caballero’s efforts to develop a language access plan for Spanish-speakers in collaboration with the city’s Public Affairs office. As part of this plan, Spanish translation and interpretation are now available to all city departments on request. I plan to encourage implementation of additional accessibility measures, such as childcare at city meetings.

5) I have served as the liaison to the city’s Youth Commission, and in collaboration with staff, have built a stronger relationship between the commission and the city council. We have established an annual retreat with the youth and an annual report to the council where the youth present the work they’ve done during the year. I also regularly encourage local businesses and business organizations to support the youth jobs programs in hope that more of our local businesses will take on summer youth interns. The administration has set a goal of expanding the program to 1,000 jobs.

4. If you are challenging an incumbent, please provide specific reasons why you feel you would do a better job on the board of education than the individual you are running to replace. What votes or policy positions taken by your opponent do you disagree with, and why?

N/A

5. What is DPS doing well?

DPS has an incredibly strong community of teachers, students, parents, and advocates who work hard to support a thriving public education system. The district’s strategic plan is solid and DPS does a great job at recognizing student achievement through art shows, appearances at board meetings, certificates, etc. Teachers are well-organized and coordinate and learn from each other. Advocacy among district teachers and staff is very strong.

6. What could DPS do better?



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I believe that DPS schools would serve students better if they were more racially integrated. For example, my child's (magnet) school is 50% white students in a 20% white district. In addition, though efforts have been made to implement restorative discipline practices, the implementation seems inconsistent from school to school. DPS could do a better job with consistently using restorative discipline and moving away from OSS and tradition ISS.

7. What do you think standardized test scores tell us about schools, students, and educators?

Standardized test results correlate almost entirely to the socioeconomic status of the students taking the tests. This is a valuable lesson in the impact of poverty on young children and families and highlights the need to ensure that every child has a stable home, healthy food, adequate healthcare, and extracurricular opportunities to ensure that they can fully succeed in school. When every child has what they need, then test scores will be a more reasonable way to judge student success and ability.

8. How would you balance school stakeholder concerns about high suspension rates and the school-to-prison pipeline with concerns about adequate safety and discipline in schools?

Studies show that suspensions are a primary cause of school push-out and do not support the disciplinary needs of students or provide the learning environments that students with behavioral challenges need. I support eliminating out-of-school-suspensions and implementing restorative justice practices in in-school-suspensions. This shift could help children develop skills in anger management, conflict resolution, studying & test-taking, and other areas that they need to succeed in traditional classrooms. Students with disabilities or who are otherwise unable to succeed in a traditional school setting should be provided with the resources and services that they need to receive a sound basic education in another setting. I also recognize that these shifts require school leadership to be on board and that given existing funding and the limited resources allocated to public education, it's difficult to shift school practices.

9. School Resource Officers are assigned to all middle and high schools and to some elementary schools. What role do you believe SRO's should play in school communities? Do you support city funding for SRO's?

I do not believe that schools should have SRO's and do not support city funding for SRO's. As school policing has increased, so has criminalization of youth in schools, racial disparities in school discipline, and school push-out. I have advocated for replacing SRO's with professional staff who are trained in de-escalation, restorative justice, mental health first aid, and other skills deemed necessary by school staff to implement safe and effective disciplinary practices. If police officers are needed to handle a situation of violence, they can be called as they would be if violence occurred in any other setting or location.



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10. The racial demographics of DPS enrollment do not reflect those of Durham County. Should DPS work to address these concerns via redistricting or bussing policies? Please explain your reasoning in your response.

I believe that redistricting DPS schools to provide more racial balance would benefit the district overall, as well as provide clear benefits to individual students and families. Residential segregation is a fact of life in US cities, and Durham is unfortunately no different. When low-income students and families are concentrated in high-poverty schools, those schools struggle to provide extra-curricular activities, field trips, tutoring, and other services to students. In schools where families have more resources, parent volunteers can easily organize PTA fundraisers, after-school clubs, carnivals, and other events to enhance the school experience and build a sense of community in the school. Since test scores primarily correlate to family income, high-poverty schools become labeled as “low-performing” and parents with resources may choose to send their kids to other schools outside the district to avoid them. This in turn starves the school of resources, exacerbating the performance issues, and the cycle continues. Districting that results in a healthy diversity of students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds in each school provides the most beneficial learning environment for the largest number of students and avoids the sort of stigmatization that might cause families to leave the district.

11. Are charter schools good for Durham? Why or why not?

Charter schools are not good for Durham. A recent study has shown that every student who attends a charter costs the school district upwards of \$3,000 in fixed costs that must be paid regardless of student enrollment. Charter schools are intentionally diverting funding away from public education and threaten the health and sustainability of our public schools. The majority of students, especially Black, brown, & low-income students will continue to rely on our public school system, and we must do all we can to strengthen and support it.

12. What city initiatives aimed at youth do you support and how do they work in tandem with county and DPS initiatives to holistically support Durham's young people, especially those with marginalized identities?

I serve as the council liaison to the Youth Commission, and in that role have had the opportunity to work with a diverse group of young residents from across Durham. I've also had the opportunity to work with youth on our Participatory Budgeting task force and through youth forums organized by the Office on Youth. I've been an advocate for expanding our city's youth jobs program, which is a collaboration between the city, county, and DPS, and have worked to engage the county commissioners more in the work of the youth commission, which is a joint city/county project.

13. Many parents and educators are excited about transforming Durham Public Schools using the community school model. How do you envision the City of Durham partnering with and supporting the community school work currently underway? If you are not familiar with the community school model, please review these documents before responding to this question.



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a. [Link to Report from Center for Popular Democracy](#)

I strongly support the community schools model and believe that this program can transform schools into community hubs that serve the needs of students, families, and communities. I hope the city can partner with the community schools teams to help link students and families to resources and services that the city and our partner organizations provide (housing, eviction diversion, reentry services, etc.)

14. DPS is currently 30+% Latinx. Though many of these students are U.S.-born, many are not, and most have immigrant parents. What would you do to protect all immigrant students and families, regardless of documentation status or criminal background?

I believe our schools should be sanctuaries for students to learn and be safe, regardless of their immigration status. I support the DPD's policy of not asking for people's documentation status and not cooperating with ICE operations in the area. I also support the grassroots community work by activists and sanctuary churches in the area to protect our undocumented neighbors. I supported changes in the DPD's U-Visa policy to provide more visas to undocumented victims of crime.

15. If elected will you commit to advocating for increased resources for bilingual families, including interpretation and mental health services, and hiring bilingual staff for positions that interact substantially with the general public?

Yes, I have been a strong advocate for more language access services in the city and am excited that we have recently adopted a language access plan. This plan provides access to translation and interpretation services for all city departments. My platform also calls for hiring of additional bilingual employees.

16. What role should law enforcement officials have in schools?

Law enforcement officials should be called when it is determined that force needs to be used to keep students, staff, or others present in a school safe. I do not believe they should have a daily presence in schools or should be asked to handle ordinary disciplinary issues or nonviolent criminal activity (e.g. drug use).

17. One of the most significant challenges facing our students is housing instability caused by rising costs of rent and home ownership. What policies do you support that would help low-income and working class families better afford to live in Durham?

I support passing the proposed \$95M housing bond this fall, that will allow us to add thousands of



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units of affordable housing and stabilize thousands more. I also advocate at the state level for stronger tenant protections and inclusionary zoning. I support increasing the minimum wage, giving families more income with which to pay for housing, and allowing context-sensitive denser housing to be built in Durham's urban neighborhoods.

18. When considering approval or rejection of housing development projects before the council, what factors do you consider before making your decision on how to vote?

The only housing developments that the city council has the opportunity to approve or reject are ones that require an annexation or rezoning. Many housing developments are built by-right, without any council approval being required. That said, my primary considerations when deciding whether to approve a rezoning or annexation for a housing development are the affordability of the housing and the environmental impact of the development. I'm more likely to approve smaller less-expensive homes and denser homes, which have less environmental impact than larger homes on large lots. We need significantly more housing in Durham, especially housing that's affordable to low-income people.

19. Despite the fact that they are the group with the highest number of students enrolled, black students are struggling significantly with respect to their white counterparts. How do you account for this, and what do you think you and other policy makers in Durham can do to change this trend?

The achievement gap is a national crisis and directly attributable to a legacy of racism and racial marginalization that Black students and families have faced in this country for centuries. As a city council member, I can play a direct role in improving quality of life for Black students in Durham. Providing access to affordable housing, living wage jobs, high quality transit, and recreational opportunities to Black students will have a direct impact on student achievement. I also believe that reparations for hundreds of years of enslavement and racist public policies are due to the Black community.

20. Do you support the right of public sector workers in North Carolina to collectively bargain?

Yes. I recently introduced a city council resolution calling for the end of the ban on public sector collective bargaining, which passed the council unanimously.

21. Identify two specific policy changes at the state level that you believe would best improve the wellbeing and academic outcomes for students in Durham.

- 1) Raising the minimum wage to \$15/hr (and indexing it to inflation).
- 2) Investing heavily in the construction and redevelopment of affordable housing in gentrifying



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urban areas, likely through a statewide bond issue.

3) Honorable mention: Medicaid expansion.

22. If elected, what is your single biggest policy priority and how do you plan to accomplish it?

My biggest priority is to ensure that the implementation of our 5-year affordable housing plan, supported by the bond issue on the ballot, goes well. As council liaison to the DHA, I'm well-positioned to provide oversight and assistance to DHA employees and staff as we implement this plan in partnership with the city. This bond issue is a bold step toward fixing our affordable housing crisis, and it's absolutely critical that the implementation of the program goes well. I plan to meet regularly with DHA staff and board members, as well as city staff and board members, to ensure things are on track and make changes where needed.

23. Recognizing that it is difficult to be an expert in all things, please let us know who your two or three most trusted advisers or policy experts are, and specify their area of expertise. What is it about these individuals that leads you to value their judgment?

City planning & zoning - Mel Norton
Political organizing, campaigning & strategy - Sendolo Diaminah
Affordable housing - Steve Schewel
Durham history - Ray Eurquhart

I also get regular policy ideas and advice from the other local elected officials in the Local Progress Network and from my colleagues, Javiera Caballero, Charlie Reece, & Vernetta Alston. I value the opinions and judgment of these individuals because of their long-term commitment to working for a better Durham, their political commitment to equity and inclusion, and their knowledge and skills in their field.