

Chalkbeat Q&A

Tell us a bit about yourself. How long have you lived in the school district? What do you do for a living?

I began my career at Standard and Poor's, where I rated public sector and utility bonds. I then moved to banking, where I helped public sector clients, including school districts in the Western United States, to raise financing. Today I work for a firm that provides advice to school districts across the country on enrollment, facility planning, financing, and project management. We moved to Jeffco from Calgary ten years ago next February.

Tell us about your connection to the school district.

I've had four children go through Jeffco schools, including Kyffin Elementary, Creighton Middle, and Lakewood and Wheat Ridge High Schools. For nine years, I've been very involved as a volunteer. Among other roles, I've chaired the Wheat Ridge High School Accountability Committee, been president of its PTA, and on a member of the District Diversity Council and Choice Committee. For six years I was also president of the Jefferson Association for Gifted Children, where we engaged in non-partisan, evidence-based advocacy for gifted and twice exceptional special education students at the local, district, and state level.

Jeffco's student achievement is low and the board is having discussions about how to hold the district accountable for showing improvement. What would you do as a board member to improve student achievement?

Improving student achievement is primarily the job of management, not the board. Our role is to provide the district with strong governance, which includes setting goals and critiquing and approving the district's strategy for achieving them, ensuring a billion tax dollars in revenue is efficiently used and allocated to implement that strategy, monitoring risks to the strategy's success, holding the Superintendent accountable for performance, and accurately presenting the district's results to our many stakeholders. Providing strong governance is what the board can do to improve achievement results.

I'll give you two examples of what I mean about the need for better governance in Jeffco. When district management proposed to move 6th

grade into middle schools all at once, the board didn't challenge management's proposal, or require that such a big change first be piloted to identify and hopefully work out potential problems before district-wide implementation. This year we saw the result of that all-at-once approach, as 6th grade achievement growth plummeted to far below the state median. All those kids are now going to have to struggle a lot harder to catch up academically. And research suggests that the same problem is likely to occur again with the new 6th graders entering middle school this year.

The second example is what the district is doing now with respect to its "1:1 device strategy" – basically giving every student a chromebook. In this case, the change was previously piloted in some schools, but the results of those pilots were never rigorously evaluated (as they would be in high performing school systems). Yet once again the 1:1 device approach is being rolled nearly out all-at-once across the district. And in this case too, the board didn't push back against management's proposal.

A strong board would have done more to challenge management's approach and asked them to either modify their plan or provide much more evidence to support their proposal. And a board practicing strong governance would hold people accountable for taking such a risky action that produced such poor – and avoidable – results.

Jeffco's dropping enrollment was a factor in school closure recommendations a few years ago. Superintendent Jason Glass put a pause on that, but discussions about closures may come back at some point as enrollment continues to drop. Are there any circumstances under which school should be closed? If not, how would you handle declining enrollment?

Let's put this question in context. We live in a state where there are a lot of areas competing with K-12 for funding. Between 2000 and 2018, Colorado's annual spending on public pensions (PERA) grew from \$1.5 billion to \$5.8 billion (3.9x); social safety net programs grew from \$4.6 billion to \$14.3 billion (3.1x), and K-12 education grew from \$8.0 billion to \$11.3 billion (just 1.4x). And that doesn't include the growing backlog of unfunded infrastructure projects, or the need to spend more on higher education to hold down in-state tuition expenses, or the possibility of a prolonged recession that will likely drive social safety net and PERA costs much higher.

The painful reality is that it is likely that Jeffco's revenues will be under pressure for years to come. That puts the onus on the district – both management and the board – to carefully focus on cost management, to ensure that the billion dollars in revenue we receive each year is used as effectively and efficiently as possible. The facilities discussion is just one part of that. It would be politically expedient but fiscally irresponsible to simply say I'm against closing any schools. I understand why closing schools is something that families want to avoid. But our ability to do that, and to continue to fund programs that people highly value, as well as rising pension, healthcare, and salary costs for the district's employees is going to require a much greater focus on cost management, and a much deeper understanding how district facilities and activities relate to both costs and results.

Is there anything different the district should do to improve school safety?

School violence is a crime, and crimes have three elements, which is the way I approach the safety issue. The first is opportunity, where Jeffco, and John McDonald in particular, is a national leader and has gone a very long way towards making our schools much harder targets for anyone considering an act of violence.

The second is means. Jeffco does not control access to firearms and other weapons, so this one is out of the district's hands. The third element is motive, which is the area where I think there is still room for further improvement. Specifically, in recent years, I've seen a very sharp increase in the amount of time that counsellors spend on suicide and violence threat assessments, which takes them away from their primary roles. And while I appreciate the logic of increasing spending on social and emotional learning as a long-term preventative measure, I think these funds would have been much better spent on increasing our ability to better deal with students who are today experiencing chronic and acute conditions and episodes that could lead to violence. If elected, I will strongly advocate for hiring more psychologists and social workers, as well as doing a much better job of efficiently coordinating our efforts with other community organizations focused on the same goals.

Finally, improving achievement is also part of the solution. For nine years, I saw too many kids coming into ninth grade who suddenly realized they were unprepared for high school level content. Almost always, this triggered three powerful emotions: fear for their future, a sense of betrayal, and anger bordering on rage. In too many cases,

these eventually morphed into depression, hopelessness, and substance abuse. These are the painfully human costs of our failure to adequately educate too many kids that nobody wants to talk about.

Jeffco's annual budget approaches \$1 billion, and voters recently approved both a property tax increase and a bond measure. What do you think of the district's budget priorities and would you change anything about the district's spending?

As I said above, a key board governance role is to ensure that resource allocation is aligned with the district's strategy. This includes not only traditional budgeting, but also much more clarity in the critical area of cost management, to ensure we are getting a positive return on the investments we make with taxpayers' scarce funds. Here's an example of what I mean: How much does Jeffco spend on teacher professional development, including direct costs and the cost of teacher time? And what return do we get on that investment? Nobody knows.

A study of large school districts a few years ago ("The Mirage", by The New Teacher Project) found that they spent (in direct costs and the value of teacher time) an average of \$18,000 per year per teacher on professional development that produced no improvement in achievement results.

Jeffco has 4,700 teachers. If we're spending \$18,000 per year per teacher, that's \$84.6 million in costs that probably aren't generating a positive return on investment. How many other activities that Jeffco performs are also generating costs without any positive impact -- much less a cost-effective impact -- on critical results like student achievement? We don't know. But if I'm elected, I'm going to push very hard to find out. Because we can't offer teachers higher pay, and meet demand for new programs, and fund our rising PERA payments if in our annual budget process all do is argue over \$35 million or so in incremental revenue each year.

What do you see as the biggest issue facing Jeffco schools today and how do you hope to have an impact on said issue as a school board member?

Let me start by asking those of you reading this a question. How many of you worry about how well schools are preparing our children to succeed in the 21st century economy? Every parent and employer I know is very worried about this.

I'm running because Jeffco needs to do a much better job of preparing our children for the challenges that they will face after graduation. There are two key aspects to this: academic achievement and career and technical education.

Some will say that academic achievement on its own isn't sufficient for success in today's economy. I don't disagree. But I also know that being proficient in reading, writing, math, and science are undoubtedly necessary.

They say that up to third grade, students are learning to read, and after that they are reading to learn. Students who are eligible for free and reduced lunch make up about 30% of all Jeffco students. On the 2019 CMAS, 75% of Jeffco third graders eligible for free and reduced didn't meet state literacy standards. Moreover, neither did 44% of students who were not eligible for free and reduced lunch.

If you can't read well, it is hard to keep up. So it is no surprise that by 6th grade, 85% of free and reduced eligible students didn't meet state math standards. But neither did 55% of the students not free and reduced eligible.

By 8th grade, 84% of free and reduced eligible students didn't meet state science standards – and neither did 53% of the non-FRL eligible students.

In one of the nation's most affluent and well-educated school districts, these results are nothing short of scandalous.

Since we moved here almost ten years ago, student achievement in Jeffco has stagnated. And over the last two years, our SAT scores have actually declined. This is setting our kids up for failure and the board must not hesitate to hold district management accountable for substantially improving achievement results. That is a critical role of the board in every performance improvement program, whether in the public, private, or non-profit sector.

Jeffco must also do a much better job for those students who aren't going on to college right after graduation.

I've worked with DPS CareerConnect program, when they helped us launch our CareerExplore program at Wheat Ridge High School, which is aimed at kids who have lost hope. And one of my children was in the

first class of advanced manufacturing apprentices at CareerWise Colorado.

I've seen the varying quality of the state's career and technical education programs, and how we need to do a better job of coordinating them across districts, in order to make it easier for employers to partner with our K-12 districts and schools. Today, Colorado employers have far too many middle skill jobs that they can't fill. We have to do a much better job of preparing our kids for them, which may require the Jeffco board to take the lead in coordinating our CTE efforts with other district and state boards.

These are all daunting challenges, but I know they can be met. I've seen it done, and not just in other places. We choiced our kids into Wheat Ridge High School, where 37% of students are Latinx and 50% of students are eligible for free and reduced lunch. And we saw what is arguably the most diverse high school in Jeffco regularly deliver outstanding results not just in achievement growth, but also in cost management and innovative career and technical education programs. Don't tell me it can't be done. I know it can. That's why I'm running for school board.