



**Stand for Children Colorado, Denver Chapter  
2011 DPS Board of Education Candidate Questionnaire**

Candidate Name: Emily Sirota

Board of Education - District 1

**Section I**

1) What are your qualifications to become a school board member? Please give specific examples.

While working for Governor Schweitzer in Montana as an economic development specialist focused on workforce policy, I worked hand in hand with the governor's education policy advisor. We collaborated on issues ranging from the improvement of the quality and accessibility of early childhood education to expanding the ability to earn college credit in high school. I can be a strong advocate for the community with my experience in crafting public policy. I have experience in policy making at the state and federal level, having worked for a US Senator, US Representative, and a governor.

I work to build trust through community organizing, establishing relationships, and gaining the respect of stakeholders in order to accomplish goals. Further, I am a concerned parent who is shocked by the lack of rigor, effectiveness and accountability in DPS.

2) What are the top three challenges facing public schools in your region? If elected, how would you address them?

a. Lack of Rigor. One of the greatest challenges facing public schools in southeast Denver is lack of rigor. I have heard over and over again from both parents with children in DPS and parents who do not currently send their children to public schools that they want to see more rigor in our schools. During the southeast community engagement process put on by DPS, one of the biggest concerns was the lack of rigorous programming in our middle schools and high schools. If we want more kids enrolled in our middle schools, and we actually want our children to go on to college, we must create more rigorous programming. We need a more robust curriculum that includes more of the arts, physical education and other critical thinking activities that inspire our children to develop a love for learning.

b. Lack of Institutional Effectiveness. We see symptoms of an ineffective public education system every day. Drop out and remediation rates of DPS students are alarming. The remediation rate of our students who do go on to higher education is unconscionable. We are asking parents and students to pay twice for their education. First parents are paying property taxes to send their children to public schools. When our children graduate from high school, we expect that they have mastered the high school curriculum and are ready to go on to the next level. It is unacceptable that more than half of students going on to college have to take at least one remedial class. Student drop-out is the most damaging impact of ineffectiveness. Access to quality education is a public service that dictates the quality of life for our children.

c. Lack of administrative accountability. We need to hold central administration and principals to a higher level of accountability, along with our teachers. Principals should be held more accountable for the successes of the teachers in their buildings. They should be given the resources to assist those teachers who need additional help to becoming more effective and should be adept at using the tools at their disposal for addressing teachers who are not effective in the classroom.

3) Hypothetically, you have a chronically low-performing school in your region; please identify three strategies you would use to improve the school. What role would the community play in your plan?

Communities should always be informed when a school is low-performing, as a matter of due diligence on the part of DPS. We, as a school system and as a community, should not shy away from our weaknesses. We must address them head-on and lead on school improvement. When we are better able to self-assess and genuinely take in stakeholder input, we build the trust within the community that pays for the system, and consequently they will be more apt to support future mill levy overrides and bonds.

a. The first strategy is to address human capital. We should partner our lowest performers with the best performers. The staff that does well at other schools can help train staff at underperforming schools. We need to incentivize mutually beneficial relationships and create a successful system of public education in Denver. Our community demands and deserves it.

b. Increasing the resources available to underperforming schools is another important step in addressing the performance problem. We could engage in outreach to the business community and to civic organizations for additional support, while we continue to work with state and federal officials for sufficient funding and support to our system. Taking into account the student-based budgeting system DPS uses, however, we can evaluate a more robust system of weights targeted for stabilizing a school before it begins to underperform. Resources go beyond funding, however. When a school's performance begins to falter, if we have established mutually fulfilling relationships with the surrounding community, we should be able to tap those resources to provide services such as tutoring and after-school programs. We can also work with the city to target focus in the Lights on After Dark program and leverage the assets in the DPS Foundation, which could be a great opportunity to work collaboratively with the Mayor.

c. We could reevaluate strategies used for parental engagement. We could evaluate the system constructed for the student and find out what can be done to make students' learning environment more enriching, as well as ensure that parents have what they need to support learning at home. I think we should monitor and evaluate the pilot project recently launched at Fairview Elementary in northwest Denver that provides stipends to teachers so that they can conduct home visits. This could be a good way to reach out to parents who may not be comfortable in schools or with teachers or are unable to come to school during working hours. According to the teachers I've heard from, they are grateful for the chance to understand the challenges their students might face at home. This insight helps them sculpt classroom instruction according to how a family can help with homework, as one example.

4) At what point do you think a school turnaround plan must be considered? If elected, what criteria will you use to review, approve, and implement a turnaround plan?

We ought to be in the habit of constant improvement; we cannot forsake the education of any of our children. If a majority of students at the school are underperforming for more than two years, a process should be in place to develop a plan to put the school on the path to improvement. There must be a way to address problem schools before they reach a point of no return.

Community engagement is essential for a successful turnaround plan. School administrators, teachers, students, parents and other community stakeholders must all share in the responsibility for making the plan successful. Without buy-in from all stakeholders, it is unlikely that implementation will be successful. All parties have the best interests of our children at heart. A collaborative process with all parties working in good faith is necessary.

A turnaround plan must demonstrate steps that will show improvement every year. The way to be successful in this endeavor is to do a careful analysis (performed by trained evaluators), to understand where the strengths and weaknesses of a school are. By understanding the individual needs, weaknesses, strengths and opportunities of our schools, properly tailored turnarounds can be constructed and executed successfully.

5) What do you expect the district superintendent to do to increase student achievement across the district and at individual schools? How would you evaluate his/her progress?

A district superintendent should be engaged with all stakeholders in the district: administration, principals, teachers, parents, students, and voters - engaged means being present in the community, visiting schools, attending community events, and talking to people. The district superintendent gathers much information first-hand in order to truly understand what is happening in the field. Performance should be judged on the indicators in the job description, nothing more, nothing less. That is what is fair.

6) The school board has the responsibility of approving the district budget. How would you propose holding the district administration accountable for strategic resource management?

My pledge is to serve with an eye for fiscal responsibility. As a taxpayer myself, I want to see strong fiscal stewardship from the board. A vision for the entire district is necessary to properly allocate scarce resources. We need a roadmap for where we want to be and the steps we are going to take to get there. By agreeing on a shared vision, allocation questions become less contentious.

7) Considering the current fiscal climate, in which three areas of the district's budget would you support substantial reductions or reallocations? What creative alternatives would you propose to minimize direct cuts to classrooms?

a. Recreation could be one area we can look at for reallocation/reduction. Many schools are located very close to parks. DPS should work with the city council to collaboratively address the use of our public spaces and resources.

b. Transportation could be looked at for savings. The Success Express should be evaluated as it is implemented in the fall, as this student transit solution could be an innovative, fiscally responsible, and environmentally sustainable way to get kids to schools. This could have potential district-wide.

c. Greenprint Denver could be expanded to DPS. We could partner with the city's Greenprint Denver initiative to save resources in the classroom while making Denver greener.

8) Would you support a bond and mill levy increase in 2012? If yes, what would you include in the bond/mill levy request? If no, why not?

I would like to see the most effective use of current bond money, and we can determine projects and needs from there.

9) ProComp, Denver's pay for performance system, was designed to be modified and improved over time. If elected, would you support opening up ProComp for renegotiation between the district and the Denver Classroom Teachers Association?

I am open to renegotiation. We should periodically review all of our programs and adjust based on the results of the evaluation.

10) Please give an example of a situation in which you were not familiar with a concept and had to gain the necessary knowledge to make the best decision. How would you apply similar strategies if elected to the school board?

My father always said, "It's less important that you know the answer; it's most important that you know how to find it." I have tried to live this saying. I never say I know the answer to something if I don't really know it. I was lucky enough to have talented and inspiring teachers and parents, who

showed me the joy of learning. Further, even when I do understand a concept, more exploration beyond my own mind is generally important for sound decision-making. Soliciting input from the parties affected by a policy or decision is a good place to start. Requesting help from experts is also useful. It is important to hear from a variety of parties, even those I may be less inclined to agree with. A number of views can invite a richer exploration of an issue and result in a more nuanced solution.

11) In recent years, DPS has been building a portfolio of diverse public school options. As a school board member, what role do you think diverse public school models play within the district? How will you support the unique learning needs of students?

I believe in choice. I believe high quality choices should exist in all neighborhoods so that we can return to community-based education. We should have options available within DPS that meet the needs of all of our students.

12) If elected, how will you attract and retain students in the district?

If we improve the value of a DPS diploma, we will stop students from leaving the district. Right now, many parents do not believe DPS provides the necessary rigor to properly educate their children. They will come back when they perceive that DPS has fixed this problem.

13) Do you support the concept of social promotion? Why or why not? What action should be taken if a student has not demonstrated the skills necessary to move to the next grade level?

In general, social promotion hurts a child because he/she is not mastering the necessary skills to be successful in the next grade level. Instead of promoting an unprepared child, we should adopt programs to assist a child who is behind during the school year and into the summer.

14) What is your philosophy on board governance? What strategies will you use to be a productive member of the board?

The role of a board member is to make public policy. My role as a board member should be to engage with the community to understand the needs and wishes of southeast Denver and bring that information to the board when making decisions. However, in elected government, I cannot be everything to everyone. Sometimes I will have to make tough decisions, but this should be done after hearing from stakeholders. To be a productive member of the board, I will work collaboratively and in good faith with other members. It is important to look for places where members share common ground and start from there.

15) What are your top three ideas to recruit, retain, develop, and reward excellent teachers and principals?

a. We should create a system that incentivizes new teachers to come to the profession. Today, that focus is not on retirement benefits, but on current pay, stature as a profession, and on the work environment.

b. We should compensate on an increasing scale based on merit to keep good teachers working up the ladder.

c. We should provide for leadership and upward mobility. Reward teachers with demonstrated leadership and student growth capabilities by increasing autonomy.

16) DPS continues to see a high level of principal turnover in low-performing schools. How would you work with the superintendent and school staff to address the school leadership challenge?

We need to change principal accountability, while at the same time make sure that principals are receiving the support from administration they need to be successful. The principal sets the tone for the entire school environment. A strong leader is one who sets a vision, inspires the community and provides the roadmap for accomplishing the vision. Clear standards should be established for what is expected from a principal, and principals should understand that they would be held to those standards. We should be setting up our principals for success by giving them as much opportunity for professional development as teachers and by selecting the right people for the job in the first place.

17) DPS is a pilot district for the implementation of Senate Bill 191. What is your position on the law? If elected, what role will you play to ensure successful implementation in DPS?

I believe clear measures of teacher effectiveness can be a useful tool in helping our teachers and principals to consistently improve their performance.

18) If elected, what are 3-4 measurable goals you hope to accomplish in your four-year term?

a. Increase the rigorous programming in southeast schools.

b. Work with DPS to implement improved parental engagement tools for teachers

c. Identify areas of savings in the DPS budget and redirect the savings to go back into the classrooms.

19) What else could you tell us about yourself or your experience that can help us make an endorsement recommendation?

My social work degree provided me with a tool kit for working in community engagement and public policy forums. I have training in policy, community organizing, research and conflict management. I am committed to working collaboratively with teachers, parents, students, the community, the administration and the board to do what is best for the education of our children. I am committed

to finding common ground within a fractured board because the future of our children and our city is at stake. I am committed to making tough decisions for the sake of our schools.