Coalition for DC Public Schools and Communities

C4DC is a group of organizations representing every ward in the District, who have come together to advocate so children in all corners of our city have strong DCPS public schools in their neighborhoods as well as choices – from Pre-K through high school – that fully meet the needs of our students and our communities.

Please return to this survey to c4dcpublicschools@gmail.com by October 5th

Candidate’s Name: Ryan Tauriainen Ward: 4

1. Why are you running for this office?

In looking at the current make-up of the SBOE and what responsibilities it has, I feel that my skillset is needed on the board. I have dedicated my life to improving education outcomes for children. I have worked in DC education for many years as a teacher, principal, and district leader. When I was a principal, I was saddened that not a single member of our state board had led a DC school. Many have never even taught in a DC school. In the wake of the 2016 election, I was inspired to take action into my own hands to make sure educators were represented on the board. Currently, I am the only school leader who is running for SBOE; and in fact, I was DC's Principal of the Year in 2016. I think this type of experience is essential to provide oversight and give policy advice in education. I still work in school buildings every day with students, teachers, and families. These policies directly effect my work, every day, and I want to be a voice for the thousands of educators in this city.

I run because I love the students of this city. I love where I live in Ward 4, and I want to represent my region. But I do not ask the people of Ward 4 to elect me just to better education in our corner of the city. I want to better education for all students in DC, no matter if they are in my ward or east of the river. I am a person that the voters can trust to do all he can for the kids of DC, because it is what I have done my whole career. Our kids deserve a champion, and I want to be that champion.

2. How will you engage your constituents, parents, teachers, students and the community?

I am a proud resident of Ward 4’s Takoma neighborhood, and being a high-profile member of the DC education community has led people from around Ward 4 (and the rest of Washington) to engage with me on a number of issues. I have offered my consulting, through my organization KinderProgress, to parents and educators for free over several years. Those relationships are already established. My engagement with constituents, parents, teachers, students, and the community comes easy. Being a principal is a lot like being a politician – being the face for a school and balancing the needs and concerns of many stakeholders. Engaging with people is a strength of mine, because of this experience. I have direct connections to most of the schools in Ward 4, already, and frequently attend events. In some cases, I am personally friends with the principal or staff members; I know families at our various schools. I have former students in our ward, as well. I already make a point to attend ANC Meetings and the PTA/LSAT meetings of Ward 4 schools, and would do so more routinely as a member of this board. More than anything, I would simply be available. It is astounding to me how many members of DC government do not follow-up or even email/call constituents back. I will never allow communication to go unanswered, when elected.

3. What qualifications do you bring to the office of State Board of Education, including your professional or personal experience with public education in our city?

My entire career and life in DC has been in public education – specifically working with low-income communities. I started my teaching career with Teach For America at a traditional public school. My 7th grade students started far below grade level and came in as the students with the lowest scores in the school.
By the year’s end, they were the highest performing class in the entire district – having 0% of classrooms scoring better on state assessments. As a teacher in DC, I specifically taught in the Anacostia neighborhood. Concurrently with being a full-time teacher, I earned my master’s in education. In 2011, I was accepted into the highly competitive New Leaders program and at 25 was promoted to assistant principal of a charter school in the Woodridge neighborhood of northeast DC. I supervised classrooms from Pre-K to 4th grade that year. After completing my residency, I was promoted to principal with AppleTree Public Charter School. I was 26 years old when I started my principalship: the youngest in the United States. I was principal of schools in southwest Waterfront and in northwest Columbia Heights. While principal of the Columbia Heights campus, my leadership moved proficiency scores in math and literacy from 60% to over 90%. Staff culture was rated in the 99th percentile by TNTP studies (the highest score ever in DC). Also as principal, I became a published author of five children’s books currently used in schools throughout DC and beyond.

In 2015 and 2016, I was named “Most Outstanding Principal” by the DC Association of Chartered Public Schools. In 2016, I was the final chosen by the DC Charter School Board to compete for the Washington Metropolitan Principal of the Year – a contest sponsored by The Washington Post and including all schools in DC, southern Maryland and northern Virginia. I was ultimately the winner of the entire competition and named The Washington Post’s Principal of the Year, 2016. After receiving the highest honor of a school leader in DC, I was promoted to a district leadership role – overseeing early childhood programming across several schools all over DC. In this role, I provide all leadership, training, professional development, and curriculum for our early childhood educators.

Concurrently, I founded a consultancy called KinderProgress, which helps schools and families navigate early childhood education in DC. My organization provides free curriculum resources accessed all over the country. As a district leader, I have won five national awards. I was named to the Association Forum’s “Forty Under 40” list in 2016. In 2017, I was named the “Early Literacy Educator of the Year” by the National Council of Teachers of English, in recognition to my contributions to teacher education in early literacy. Also in 2017, I was given the “Rose C. Engel Award for Excellence in Professional Practice” by the Council for Exceptional Children, in recognition of my contributions to special education practices in early learning. In 2018, the Leading for Children organization awarded my projects in curriculum as “Grand Prize” of their Innovative Ideas contest. Also in 2018, NBC profiled me as one of 30 people in the world honored as a June “Pride30” recipient in light of my career in early childhood education. My work in education continues today – I have never stopped working in school buildings. I’ve improved my portfolio further by advising and leading classes for teachers who are earning their master’s in education at Johns Hopkins University. I’ve worked with JHU students for the past three years. In every role, I continue to directly impact students, teachers, principals, and families every day.

4. Under Mayoral Control of education, in effect since 2007, the State Board of Education has very limited authority over policy. Do you believe their authority should be expanded? Yes X

I find it troubling that mayoral control has given that office so much power over DC Schools. The mayor appoints the Deputy Mayor for Education, the chancellor of DC Public Schools, the State Superintendent of Education, and members of the Public Charter School Board. Formerly, the State Board had more than an advisory role, directly overseeing OSSE and the superintendent. This role should return. There needs to be some level of checks-and-balances in our school systems. As we have seen, there have been several scandals with massive cover-ups. And yet, the board is powerless to hold anyone accountable. I strongly support the city council’s recent suggestion that power should be returned to the SBOE.

5. Should charter schools be subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and the open meetings laws for boards of directors? Yes X

Charter schools are publically funded schools, paid for through tax dollars. How these funds are being used should be open to the public, including the nature of their meetings. I have worked for charter organizations
in DC for the last 8 years, and I have been very happy with how each organization was run. However, I also
know there are some charters who were caught in embezzlement scandals. Part of me wonders, if the
information were more open would that have been a “check” on such crimes? I think so.

6. In 2016 the State Board of Education made important recommendations for how schools in the
District of Columbia should be judged as succeeding or not, consistent with the Federal ESSA
(Every Child Succeeds Act). They included putting in place a star rating for each school - 1 to 5 stars.
Do you believe the metrics proposed for that rating system capture school quality? Yes X

I appreciated the process that OSSE went through in creating the new STAR system, because they made sure
to follow the new laws while engaging many stakeholders. I was happy to be personally part of those
conversations during development. The fact of the matter is, schools are going to be judged regardless and
parents have a right to know how well their child’s school performs. The STAR system is not solely based on
tests scores; in fact, that is just 30% of the rating. Also included are academic growth, school environment,
and graduation (for high school). In response to feedback, OSSE will be adding an “Access to Opportunity”
component, as well. Within the confines of the law, I think that OSSE found an appropriate way to rate
schools. They took suggestions from the board (ex. do not put the star rating at the top of every single page),
and made edits before it ever rolled out. I find the STAR reports very user friendly and easy to navigate, too.
It is by no means a perfect system, but I think it was created in good faith.

7. Last year, DCPS was embroiled in a series of scandals around graduation rates, leading to calls for
an independent research entity to provide better analysis of how our schools are doing. Do you agree
that such an entity, outside of the control of the Mayor, is needed? Yes X

As I have stated earlier, I believe the mayor has too much power over the school system to begin with. I
think it is this problem that has led to massive cover-ups of scandals. As an informed educator, I started to
see the writing on the wall. Publicly available data showed how atrocious test scores and attendance rates
were at these schools, and yet they were touting 100% graduation and college acceptance rates. It simply
didn’t add up. Heart-warming stories like these are advantageous for politicians, but when they are lies, they
cover up a problem and only our children suffer as a result. I absolutely do think an independent entity
should get to the bottom as to how our students are truly performing. A DC high school diploma is starting
to be worth almost nothing. When the majority of our students need remediation upon entering college, we
must accept that most of our schools are not properly preparing students. Something must be done. A non-
partisan group from outside DC should be hired to provide an analysis of the schools. Intensive interviewing
of staff, families, and students should be done in addition to a deep data analysis. The results of such a report
should be released publicly, and stakeholders should be able to engage with the researchers in open forums
upon release. From there, the citizens of DC will be more informed to demand change from our leaders.

8 The State Board of Education voted on and approved the use in DC of the PARCC test to satisfy
federal testing requirements under ESSA. Only 3 states and DC are now committed to using
PARCC. Some states have advocated de-emphasizing standardized testing as the measure of
success in education.

How do you view the role of standardized testing in DC schools?

In a perfect world, standardized testing would be used to give valuable information to teachers, principals,
and parents about their particular children. It would be a way to determine growth and mastery. It would be
a tool for teachers to use to inform their teaching and differentiate for students. This is not what we see,
currently. In DC, standardized testing is mostly used to evaluate schools and teachers. It does not measure
growth well, and the data is returned long after the school year is over. We’ve watched a test that many states
have abandoned, continue to be among the biggest measures for teacher and school performance. Yet, it has
almost no significance toward improving academic achievement. Students are often not invested in the
exams and for good reason. While many tout the need for these exams: as they stand now, they mostly exist
to either justify rewards or punishments to schools and teachers.

Leaders in our district give utopian speeches about how education in DC is improving and how the whole
child is educated in our schools. I am not as impressed with the way our schools have moved in past years.
Many of the “gains” are incremental and are partly attributed to affluent schools doing even better than they
already were (essentially, increasing the gap). We have put such an emphasis on testing that we are forcing
teachers to lose their creativity and freedom. Students suffer through test-prep and long windows of exam
periods. It is insufferable. And all the while, more and more teachers decide to leave the profession. It is not
what they signed up for. DC must take a dynamic approach to testing. Indeed, some level of testing is
necessary, but it should be designed to help teachers and students and not to be simply evaluative. I believe
we should move to a new system that uses a shorter exam; is given at least twice (to show growth); and
returns data more quickly so that it may be used to improve student outcomes.

The PARCC exam has become a source of intense frustration for teachers and leaders, especially in recent
years. Over my years in DC, I have been disappointed with our testing from as far back as when we used the
DC-CAS. States are dropping the PARCC for a reason. It is not the most reliable measure of student
performance. The frontiers of standardized testing have reached new places, and yet we continue to rely on
old-fashioned techniques to evaluate students. Ideally, DC should invest in creating its own exam that is
culturally relevant to students and is useful to teachers. A helpful exam is a shorter one that is given multiple
times in the year to show growth and to give the teacher invaluable information about his or her students
before the end of the year (rather than after the school year is over). There are school districts that are
experimenting with this type of testing and exams such as NWEA have already used this model with success.
The ability is there; we simply need to act.

9. Almost half DC students now attend public charter, not neighborhood, schools in the District of
Columbia. We have over 200 publicly funded schools and 66 separate school systems (65 charter
school systems and DCPS). Up to 20 new charter schools can open each year.

Should the Council and/or Mayor have the authority to limit the expansion of charter schools?
No X

I am an employee of a charter system and I have seen the good that charter schools can bring to the district.
It is true that school choice drives performance and should be the right of a parent. Charter schools already
cannot open in a wanton fashion. There is a very intensive process that is headed by the Public Charter
School Board. These schools are heavily scrutinized and must meet particular goals or else be shut down. In
many cases, charter schools must be more accountable than a traditional public school. Honestly, the
problem of real estate already limits our charter schools. Most charter schools take over abandoned school
buildings in areas that need more choices. Most of our charter networks are trying to serve the neediest kids.
You will not find a charter school popping up in Ward 3, for instance. I believe that the mayor already has
too much control over education matters in the city, so I would not expand mayoral power further. As for
the city council, I fail to see what would make any of them an expert in education or charter schools. A
possible solution could be providing some oversight through the State Board of Education, if that oversight
is needed at all.

10. Should the Council and/or Mayor have authority over charter school siting (where they are
located)? No X

I do not see why it would be necessary to give even more authority to the mayor or council of education
matters, especially in where charter schools develop. In many ways, the city has control already of where
these schools sit. School building are extremely limited in DC, and very few networks can afford new
construction. Many of our charter schools are using former DCPS schools or catholic schools as their
buildings. When it comes to buildings owned by the city, the council and mayor already has authority. They practice immense control of siting, indirectly, already. I do not think adding to that power is wise. If an independent entity wants to sell or rent property to a new school, they should be allowed to do so. In the same vein, an approved charter school should be able to develop a building if they are so able. I struggle with the thought of creating an even more authoritarian environment for DC education.

11. The following issues are of great concern in our city. Which of these issues do you think is most important and why?

- Funding equity
- School diversity/ integration
- Giving disadvantaged student subgroups priority access to schools if they serve less than the district average
- Expanding the number and support for educators of color

While all of these issues are important, I believe that school integration is of utmost importance. It is shocking to me that in over 60 years following desegregation, children in DC are still highly segregated. Studies have shown that increased diversity (racial and socio-economic) is critical for raising achievement. As a principal in Columbia Heights, I was lucky to lead a diverse school. Not only did we have students of every racial group, but we had diversity in income and immigration status as well. Our children enjoyed a rich melting-pot of cultures from Ethiopian to Vietnamese to El Salvadorian. And likewise, student achievement climbed higher and higher.

In addition, diverse schools help to teach our students about the reality of our world. I have routinely worked with students in schools that are over 90% African American. It has been interesting to hear back from students who have grown up and entered college. Many of them realized they had never had a class with a white student before, and wondered what experiences they might have had in childhood had they been exposed to different cultures. I think this experience is also important for white students. When I attended school in Oregon, I was in classes that could be 100% white, which was not a fair reflection of what our country looks like. Back then, I was missing out on a part of life that isn’t taught through books -- but through relationships. Since 2016, our country is becoming more and more divided and the achievement gap is growing more pronounced. Diversifying schools could be one of the best ways to combat both issues.

12. The DC State Board of Education had a representative on the Mayor’s Cross-Sector Collaboration Task Force. Earlier this year, the task force put forward draft recommendations related to improving outcomes for at-risk students and creating a framework for coordinating planning decisions between DCPS and charter schools.

Which recommendation do you think is the most important and why?

It is very difficult for me to choose one recommendation, because I think the task force did an excellent job of creating goals and recommendations. However, finding ways to identify the most promising practices from schools/LEAs that are getting the best results for at-risk students (Recommendation 2.2) is the most important to me. As someone who has taught with at-risk youth for over a decade, we often ask “What works?” I currently work with first-year-teachers in DC and Prince George’s county who are in a master’s program at Johns Hopkins University. Consistently, they just want as much information and resources as possible. They want to know how to better serve their students. Sadly, I find that without me they would never receive what they need. That should not be the case for our faculty. If we can pin-point what is working, we can replicate those practices throughout the district and improve every school in DC.
13. How should the SBOE hold the Office of the State Superintendent of Education accountable?

I think a major problem in how the SBOE functions is that it has lost accountability measures for OSSE. It has become more advisory than supervisory. That being said, the board can have a strong voice in the community. It is shocking to me how few people even know who is on the SBOE and what they do. It tells me that the current members are doing a poor job of being visible. If the city council is unsuccessful in giving the SBOE back its power, then it is upon the members of the board to be as loud as possible. If there are problems in OSSE, or particular school systems, they should be exposed. The truth must be heard and it must become political fodder against elected officials who sit on their hands or cover-up scandals. As a member of the SBOE, I would make sure my constituents are well-informed and that the policies that I suggest are always with students and teachers in mind.