



2018 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview

Candidate: James Bryant (I)

James Bryant is running unopposed in the Nov. 6, 2018 general election for a seat on the Charlottesville School Board.

Bryant was appointed to the School Board in April to fill a vacancy. His seat will be up for election again in November 2019.

INTERVIEW

Mr. Bryant, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio recording and written transcript for this interview will be available online. Are you ready to start?

1. QUALIFICATIONS: Please describe your past experience that qualifies you to be on the Charlottesville School Board.

I served as an educator for 39 years, total, in several school districts: Charlottesville, Albemarle County, Madison County, and the city of Richmond. But for 29 of those years I served as a music teacher and a counselor in the Charlottesville City Schools. I am currently serving as an academic coach at the learning center at PVCC.

2. PRIORITIES: What is your top priority for action by the School Board during the next year?

During the remainder of my term— and by the way, I intend to run next year for the 4-year term— I felt that one of the top priorities that I would like us to continue to pursue as a board is to expand the 3- and 4-year-old [preschool] program. I think that is important because that lays the foundation for learning. If we can expand the program, if we can find space for parents who will be able to enroll their children in this program, that will pay off later in terms of making sure that all children will be on a level playing

field. I think it is extremely important that 3 and 4-year-olds, by the time they get to kindergarten and first grade, will at least have the skills that are required. That's one of the things I felt was important.

Secondly: I didn't get a chance to visit all the schools, but I did visit three of the schools: Buford, Walker Upper Elementary, and Venable Elementary. Of course, we know the enrollment in our schools is beginning to increase. Increased enrollment requires more space in schools to accommodate more students that will be coming in, in the next year or so. I found that there were a lot of teachers teaching in gym locker rooms, spaces that were once part of the library, or supply rooms are now being utilized as offices or classrooms. I am hoping that, in conjunction with City Council, we can really upgrade our facilities. Walker was built in 1966, when I was a seventh-grader. Of course they keep up these facilities and maintain them well, but we need to do a major upgrade with a lot of our schools to bring them into the 21st century. That should be one of our main priorities as a school board, in conjunction with City Council, to upgrade our facilities so our children will have modern classrooms. I went into a classroom at Walker that was supposed to be a science classroom, and it didn't really have any science lab [equipment]. So I think upgrading facilities should be one of the important priorities.

Third, I think we need to also pursue and consider increasing our [employment of] African American teachers. I was probably in the second wave of baby boomers who retired in 2016. I know that a lot of African Americans, or young people in general, are not going into education. Those students that are currently pursuing education as a career are so few and far between, everyone is pulling from the same pool. So I am hoping we can increase the presence of African American [teachers] in our school system to reflect the diversity of our schools. Those are a few of the things I am hoping to focus on with other members of the School Board for next year, and beyond.

3. ACHIEVEMENT: Why do we have persistent achievement or opportunity gaps? How do we ensure student success is no longer predictable by student race or any other cultural, economic or social factor?

That's a very complex question. We have been talking about the achievement gap for at least 40 years, since I have been in education. If we had one magic solution, it would have been solved. One of the things I remember as an educator is that students come with different gifts. They come to school in different situations. How do we solve the achievement gap? First of all, when people ask me that question I say that the achievement gap doesn't start at the high school. We have to remember that the

foundation [for learning] is laid in the 3- and 4-year-old program and the kindergarten program. So, the expansion of that is one of the things we can do to, hopefully, eliminate the achievement gap. If those skills are not acquired as students continue go through the grades, of course by the time they get to high school there may be an achievement gap. But also what is missing in that conversation is that, we also have to remember those students who perhaps may not be pursuing college, maybe those students who are just “average students” that tend to fall through the cracks, that sometimes we unintentionally overlook. What do we do with those children who maybe are pursuing other careers, technical school, the military, perhaps certificate programs? We have to think of those students as well.

I think the dialogue has started. We have started the dialogue, engaging the community to come in, to get input from the community. This is an issue that can't be solved by the School Board [alone]. I think teachers are doing a great job, administrators are doing a great job in terms of working with all of our students to make sure they all have an equal opportunity. We are looking from input from the community as to how we can solve this issue of the achievement gap. I also see it at the higher education level. As an academic coach, I see students coming in not really having those skills, like study habits and time management, all of those things that are required to be successful on the collegiate level that they perhaps may not have acquired while in high school.

I am excited. I think I would not have pursued being on the School Board if I didn't think that this board was committed for all children to excel, regardless of socioeconomic background. I don't just jump on boards to get involved, just to say I am a School Board member. I felt that, with all my years of experience as an educator, I could continue to bring something to the table. I look at the board as a whole, I looked at all of the administrators in Charlottesville City Schools and great teachers I've worked with over the years. All of these people are committed to making sure all of our children are successful. We are now reaching out to the community more, to seek answers and get input from the community, especially parents, to find out from them about what we all can do to ensure that all of our students are successful.

The achievement gap is not something that is going to be solved overnight. You are looking at a first-generation college student. I grew up in public housing. Neither of my parents went to college. I went on to graduate from Virginia Union University and completed my master's degree at the University of Virginia. In part because I worked hard, very hard. I had the community that encouraged me and supported me; I had the village, as they say in the black community. I had the church. Because those of us who grew up on Hardy Drive weren't supposed to be successful. I know it can be done.

Fortunately, in high school I got involved with the Upward Bound program at the University of Virginia, and that set the tone for the remainder of my career and where I was going after high school. Because when I visited my high school counselor, and she said, "What are your goals?," and I said, "I'm going to college," her response to me was: "You need to get that notion out of your head and take up a trade." This was back in the 1970s. So, despite the odds and all the barriers, I excelled, because that was the expectation of my parents. Failure was not an option. They told me, "You have three choices: you are going to school, you are going to the workforce, or you are going to the military." I chose to go to school because they wanted better for us. They didn't have the opportunity that I had. So I know that strong support from the community, the church, parental support, that provides an opportunity for children to grow and excel. I am a living example of it.

4. TEACHER COMPENSATION: What would you change about teacher compensation and performance measurements if elected?

Of course, I've watched this over the years. I can remember my first job teaching. I started off as a substitute teacher, and I made \$9,000 in my first full-time teaching job. Over the years, the school system has done a great job in terms of compensating teachers, administrators and staff members. I think our School Board and city councilors do a great job to ensure that our teachers are compensated for the job. Also, as far as evaluation, every year teachers have to come up with "smart goals." They are held accountable for those smart goals. They are reviewed each year by the administrator that is assigned to your department. You sign off on it, the administrator signs off on it, and at the end of the year you meet with your immediate supervisor to review the smart goals that you had set in the beginning of the year. That is something you take very seriously. When setting goals, they have to be measurable. I think they try to perfect the system every year so teachers are in line, in terms of meeting the needs of the students.

5. CATEC: What are your priorities for the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center? Is its joint governance by Charlottesville and Albemarle County effective?

CATEC has always been one of my favorites. As an educator and a counselor, I always felt that we need to give options to students other than going off to college. I had the opportunity to attend the CATEC graduation program in the spring. [CATEC director] Dr. [Daphne] Keiser is doing a great job at CATEC. The automotive guys come in and give

certificates to students that graduate from the internship programs. A lot of those students go on to get hired at various car dealerships. They have over 10 programs where students can get certified in their crafts and go on to do great things, and hopefully go on to become entrepreneurs in our community. Also, they have great adult education programs for those folks who choose to go back to school and get their GED. Students can acquire dual enrollment credit at CATEC as well. They have the “food bus,” where they have converted this old school bus into a restaurant. I had the opportunity to get a personal tour of the bus, and they sometimes camp out at Whole Foods and sell their products there. I am very grateful that [CATEC] is another option that some of our students are able to do, those who perhaps may not want to go to a college or two-year school, and just focus on a career. It’s wonderful and great. I think it is extremely important for us to continue to work with Albemarle County to continue to do the great work that CATEC has done over the years. Hopefully, we can continue that partnership in the future.

6. BUDGET: Name both a revenue item and an expense item in the school budget that you are concerned about and tell us why.

We haven’t started budget negotiation yet. I don’t know if I have a concern, but I certainly want to see more money allocated to upgrade our facilities. I think that is important. I won’t know further until we actually get into the budget, which is coming up very soon. But what I would like to see is more money going toward upgrading our facilities.

7. FACILITIES: What are your priorities for the school division’s future facility needs?

Certainly upgrading our schools. I’m not saying that they are in dire shape, but certainly if we are going to experience continual [enrollment] growth, we want to have adequate accommodations for those students, so teachers can teach in a nice classroom instead of old locker rooms and that type of thing. Being able to have that space, and just to update some of these spaces to bring them into the 21st century, is extremely important to me.

8. TECHNOLOGY: Please describe the role you think technology should play in the classroom.

I think technology is important. All students have access, I think more so now because of the [school-assigned] Chromebooks. Everything is geared toward technology, even taking the SOLs. At one point, I think students were taking them on the tablets when I was at Charlottesville High School. Kids now grow up with technology from elementary school on. All students are gravitating toward technology, which I think is important. But we also need to have a mixture of technology and teaching kids to be critical thinkers. I think teachers are doing a good job with balancing technology and making sure our kids are able to think critically and figure things out, and not necessarily depend on technology. Because technology is good when it works, but when it breaks down, we all go: "What are we going to do?" So we need a backup plan, in terms of how we engage our students in the classroom.

9. STUDENT SUCCESS: How should the school division ensure student success in the world of work and college beyond academics?

I think we, as a school system, need to look at all aspects of the student. Those students who are preparing to go to a 4-year school, or those who are preparing to go to a community college with the option of going to a 4-year school. We also need to look at those students who may want to go into the military or the workforce. Are we really preparing those students with interview skills, and resume-writing skills? We have to make sure that we do not leave those students out. Sometimes we focus a lot on the higher achievers, but sometimes the average student falls through the cracks. We need to make sure they are also successful and ready for the 21st-century learning experience, and for going into the workforce and going to college and apprenticeship programs. To engage all of our students, we as educators have to learn to balance all of that, and make sure we focus on all of those students that bring different talents and gifts and experience to the table. That is extremely important. I taught all types of students, from the very gifted to those with special needs. As an educator, I had to balance my lesson plans to meet the needs of all students just in one class. It was something I did for years and years. From my perspective as an educator, all students have different talents and gifts. We have to make sure that we tap into those children to make sure that they will become productive learners and citizens in our community.

CLOSING: Mr. Bryant, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow.