



## **2017 Charlottesville School Board Candidate Interview**

*Candidate: Leah Puryear (I)*

On November 7, 2017, voters in the City of Charlottesville go to the polls to elect their representatives to three seats on the Charlottesville School Board. This recording is Tim Dodson's October 2, 2017 interview with incumbent Leah Puryear (I). Other candidates in this race include: Incumbent Juandiego Wade (I) and Lisa Larson-Torres (I).

*The audio recording of this interview and complete election coverage is available on Charlottesville Tomorrow's website: <http://www.cvilletomorrow.org/cityvote>*

### **INTERVIEW**

**Ms. Puryear, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow. The complete audio recording and written transcript for this interview will be available online.**

**Information from this interview will be used in the compilation of the non-partisan voter guide being produced by Charlottesville Tomorrow. Charlottesville Tomorrow does not endorse any candidates and our goal is to provide information to the public so they can make an informed vote on issues primarily related to land use, transportation, public education and community design.**

**As you are aware, the first two questions you will be asked have been provided in advance, for the others you have been provided only the topic in advance. All school board candidates will be asked the same questions. We ask that you keep these questions confidential until all candidates have been interviewed.**

**Each candidate will be provided an opportunity to review the excerpts selected for the voter guide before its publication. Are you ready to start?**

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

I feel my most important experience, in addition to currently being an incumbent, is the work that I do on a daily basis with the Upward Bound Program at the University of Virginia. Our students are 150 percent of poverty and we work with high school students to give them all of the opportunities, exposures, and experiences needed for a true college experience. They must graduate from high school on time, they must maintain a 2.8 or better GPA, and they must apply to colleges and universities in the United States or other locations. If they choose not to go to college, we want them to have an additional educational experience so that could be in graphic art design, culinary arts, or things such as heating and air conditioning repair, computer technologies, and things of the like. All of the things that I do, in my mind, accent my experiences on the on the school board. We are working for the same things for all of our children, from pre-K to high school graduation.

**2. PRIORITIES: What is your top priority for action by the School Board during the next 4 years?**

My priority is equity. I think most people presume that equality is equity, but it is not. And I see our division working toward equity and equity is ensuring that every student that graduates from the Charlottesville City School Division is prepared to go out into the world to do something beyond high school. Whether it's formalized training, whether it's a two-year institution, a four-year institution or the real world of work. We want to ensure that all of our students are prepared. So equity is a top priority for me.

**3. CATEC: What are your priorities for the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Education Center and should CATEC build a new facility at Piedmont Virginia Community College?**

My priority for CATEC is to see that our academies are fully developed and built out. In doing our strategic plan, the CATEC board made the decision that we were going to go to the academy model and so we have four academies, and our first academy, which is in the area of science and technology, is up and running and doing extremely well. And we want to build out our other three, which will give us the latest and greatest information, education, and opportunities for our students.

As you know, more and more people are deciding to become entrepreneur. Well, you need certain skills to become an entrepreneur. You need to be able to market, you need to be able to manage, and you need to know what your skill is that you're doing. So if you decide that you want to have a startup, you need to have a plan, and we want to make sure that our academies address the needs of our students in order that they become dependent and independent —

dependent on us from CATEC to get the skills and independent in order to go out and do the jobs that they are wanting to do.

We are having, currently, discussions around our CATEC board [about whether] to leave it where it is or to move it to Piedmont. And there are advantages and disadvantages to both. One of the disadvantages may be the cost because to build a new building and to make it technically sound for the various things that we're trying to do is going to be costly. And as you know CATEC is a joint venture between the city and the county, and so where will that money come from? Is that a part of revenue sharing for Albemarle County because they now have their new bond referendum for educational buildings and buildouts? What implications does that have on the bond rating for the City of Charlottesville and providing funds for CATEC in order to build? We are on a very wonderful piece of property. Yes, it is an older building, but is that building a building that can be redone? Can it be repurposed? Can we gut it like we did for our current academy and what will that actually mean?

So I think that we need some hard and fast figures to build out where we are, improve the facility where we are, or to look at breaking ground somewhere else. And when you're looking at economies to scale and you're looking at the best things for students, I think money plays into it. I think we're doing an excellent job of rebranding CATEC. People see career and technical education as a negative, but it is not, because there are various fields that are part of career and technical education. So I think by revisiting it, rebranding it, and making it new and fresh then we are building our numbers and we are building capacities and new and fresh may not necessarily mean brand new — it may be an upgrade, as people will upgrade their homes and renovate their homes. Maybe our current structure needs an upgrade and renovation, but these are all things that we are going to take under consideration. We're looking at the monetary implications. We will put it out to our stakeholders. We will put it out to our students, our parents, and our instructors and we will make the best decision for the Charlottesville-Albemarle Technical Center.

**4. BUDGET (BOTH REVENUES & EXPENSES): Name both a revenue item and an expense item in the school budget that you are concerned about and tell us why.**

Well, on the revenue side I must say the City of Charlottesville does a wonderful job. Our funding requests are always granted. We, in my mind, give valid reasons and we can show where the money goes and how the money is spent. So my major concern with revenue is that the City Council continues to value education and continues to support our efforts to keep us in the forefront. We are a medium school division. There are some that are smaller. There are some that are larger, but our school division is growing and I think the reason that we're growing is because we're building and so with the new developments that are being built, families are buying and their children will ultimately come to our school division. And so because we're growing, I think, and I feel confident, that City Council will

see the need to continue to provide us the revenue that we need for our division to continue to be not only competitive in the Commonwealth, but competitive in the nation.

On the expense side, I think our major expense that's going to be coming up is probably facilities. What are we going to do with our facilities? Our buildings are getting older. And yes, we do the maintenance — not we the city school division but the city of Charlottesville — and they do an excellent job of maintaining our buildings. But as I said earlier, things are changing on the educational forefront and we are going to have to do some things to modernize the buildings in order that we keep up with all of the educational trends — and not fads, but trends — that are going to help our students learn and become more competitive. So I am concerned that when those expenses come up and are presented, that they're seen in a positive light and not in a way of just, “Oh, the school board is asking for more money and this is a frivolous expense.” Our buildings are getting older and we must keep them current.

**5. OPERATIONS OF THE SCHOOL BOARD & SUPERINTENDENT: What would you like to see changed about the way the School Board and the Superintendent do business both at its meetings and outside the public eye?**

This is a question that constantly comes up among those of us that are school board members. One of the things that I think might be important is, in three minutes to do public comment when you're doing a public comment, that's really a short amount of time. Often five minutes might be a little too long. So maybe we can increase our public comment to four minutes because people get nervous and it gives them an opportunity to say what they want to say and what we need to hear.

Our discussions around the table tend to be robust. I think when we need to have additional sessions — i.e. work sessions — we open them up to the public so people can come in and hear and listen. I do very much like when we have our important issues that we want to take out to the community, we do them via phone. I don't know exactly what the technological term would that be, but people can call in — so we're all sitting in a location, but you don't have to physically be present and we can answer your questions. We can hear your concerns and we can respond to them, and you then have a way of being a part of the conversation.

We never want to discount anyone in our community. Charlottesville is an extremely participatory community and we want all voices to be heard. So if you cannot come to a regularly scheduled school board meeting at 5:00 o'clock because of soccer practice or dinner or you're working a second job and you have to be at the job at 7:00, you could call in maybe at 4:00 or 4:30. If it's dinnertime, you could you know step away from the dinner table and call the number and talk to us and express your concerns because we really want to hear

from you. Everyone's not comfortable in sending an e-mail or writing a letter, and sometimes just to express yourself and make your voice be heard I think is very, very important. Outside of the general meetings and work sessions that we hold, I feel that when we have closed sessions they're very productive.

[Superintendent] Atkins brings concerns to us. We have an opportunity to talk about them in closed session. The one thing I appreciate about all of my board members is that they understand closed session is closed session. It's confidential and it's private, and I don't have to be concerned about the next morning seeing it on the front page. I think that when we are out in the community, we all have different opinions. But I think that we can express our opinions and we're respectful of each other. We know that we can disagree without being disagreeable. I think we really adhere to not having more than three of us together, so it doesn't look like we're having a meeting. We don't do the "meeting before the meeting" in the parking lot or the "meeting after the meeting" in the parking lot. And I just think that when I go around the country and I go to different educational meetings, our school board works pretty well. And when we disagree, we hear everybody's opinion. Everything that we vote on, I'm not supportive of. And I think that normally there are times when we have split votes, there are times when we have consensus, but if you have a dissenting opinion you're able to express your opinion and you're able to speak not only to our superintendent, but anyone else that is affected by your opinion, so that you can hear the other side and whether you change your vote or not, at least we hear one another. And I think that that's very, very important, especially given all that's going on not only today, but in the past and going forward. We must — we must — it's incumbent on us to be respectful of each other and to hear the other person's side because we can't move forward if we don't know how people are feeling and what that means to them.

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

Teachers in my mind are very special. They have to be the most committed individuals ever. They do not get combat pay — but the work that they do is not combative, but is extremely, extremely important. They are responsible for shaping the minds and lives of our future leaders and they are on the forefront every day. Money is important. Monetary compensation is extremely important and I think one of the things that we often lose sight of is people at a certain point want to earn more money and they see the route to earning more money in moving up in administration. But everyone that's an excellent teacher is not an [excellent] administrator.

And these are questions that I'm plagued with, and research that I need to do to see how do we compensate people. Does everyone get a five percent raise? Does everyone get a 10 percent raise? Are raises rotational? One subject area may get a raise one year and another subject area the next year. It is not to say that there's anyone that's devalued, but to give them the types of monies that they need, maybe it would have to be done on a rotational basis. If you did it on a

merit basis, would that be equitable? Who would make those evaluations? How would we make sure that if I were the math instructor and there were five math instructors, but we gave out merit pay, that we were evaluating each of the five of us equitably in order that we see the money that we need to receive? So those are things that are very very important. But I think that they are hot bed issues all over the country — how to compensate our instructors, and also looking at teachers as professionals. You must be credentialed and you can't look at education as the last resort. "Oh well, I didn't get this job in corporate America, so I'll be a teacher." No, we've got to value our teachers and make them feel that they are just as important as the CEOs and the star athletes and the actors and actresses and the entertainers — they are just as important.

**7. RACE RELATIONS: If elected, what will you do to help our community move forward in the aftermath of this past summer's violent demonstrations and how will you seek to best represent and effectively serve our economically and racially diverse communities?**

This past summer, for some, was more horrific than others. Having had the knowledge and experience of the race riots of 67 and 68, I was very surprised by the numbers of people that I have met that have never experienced anything of this magnitude. I always felt that what was going to happen on August 12th was going to be much greater and have a much more negative impact than July 8th.

Most people that I met were very, very concerned about the Klu Klux Klan on the 8th. And I was not — I was more concerned about the persons coming that were here on the 11th and 12th because they represent hatred, and their hatred comes from a place of anger. The Confederate flag means a lot to some, and not so much to others. But what has happened is we as people do not sit down and hear what the other person says. You have to listen. If you believe in the Confederate flag, don't scream and shout and holler — talk to me as I'm talking to you. If I don't believe in the Confederate flag, I don't need to scream, shout, and holler — I need to sit and I need to talk to you. We need to listen to each other.

The statues were not the issue. The issue was race and economics. Julian Bond said it best — everything in this country is trumped by race. And so when people walk into the room and they look different, others are intimidated. Everyone has a right to his or her own feelings. It is the way that you express your feelings that brings about the negative discourse. If you are listening to the conversations that are currently being held in City Council, people are talking about race and people are talking about economics. Self-preservation is the first law of man. If you don't have a job, you're hungry. If you don't have a job, you don't have anywhere to live. If you have a job that is paying low wages, you don't have a place to live. You can't take care of your basic necessities. And we have to begin to look at what are we doing — not "we" the school board because the school board cannot create enough jobs for everyone living in the city limits of the City of Charlottesville. So what are we doing in the City of Charlottesville to make this

city economically affordable? Are we bringing in more jobs? Are we developing more jobs? Are we doing things for housing and infrastructure? Are we improving housing? Are we ensuring that there's housing?

The neighborhood in which I live just recently had a house go on the market for \$499,000 plus. It sold within a month — in fact, probably within two weeks. A half a million dollars is not a starter home. How many families that live in the City of Charlottesville could have afforded to purchase that home? And I am not in a brand new community. We look at the homes that are being built in the city. Are these homes affordable? And can the persons living in the city afford to buy the homes? And when you are feeling shut out of the process, when you are feeling disenfranchised from the process, you want people to know that and you want people to hear that. And I have spent my life as the director of Upward Bound, attempting and working diligently and tirelessly for my students to be heard and for their families to be heard, and I will continue to do that because our families that live in moderate income housing and low-income housing and subsidized housing are important and they cannot be discounted.

You have no idea what I learn from my Upward Bound families and their friends that live in their communities. I am very fortunate. But what most people don't know is my mother's mother was not a college graduate. She did day's work and she was an elevator operator, and my mother and my aunt are college graduates. So they worked — her parents worked to ensure that their children had better than they. I have worked to ensure that my children have better than I have. And when you're out on the campaign trail and you're talking to parents, I don't care where they come from. I don't care what their zip code or their address is. They all say, "I want better for my child than I have." And my Upward Bound students, which are these students that we are talking about today, are having better than their parents. And their parents are in there, they're concerned, they ask the questions, and they're standing before us today at City Council and at School Board to say, "Hear us. Help us. Help our children become important citizens, not only in Charlottesville, but in the country and in the world."

**8. FUTURE SCHOOL FACILITIES: What are your priorities for the school division's future facility needs?**

It's time for an update — our schools need updating, our schools need renovating. When you walk in and you see the Sigma Lab at Charlottesville High School and the new science labs, and you go to Buford and you look at all the updated science spaces and then you look at the spaces that haven't been done, they need doing. And they need more than a fresh coat of paint. We need infrastructure, we need infrastructure built out. Whether that's adding on, whether that's reconfiguring the building, whether it's knocking out a wall, putting in something new, but if you look around us, in the counties, they're building new buildings or they're repurposing buildings and these are counties that are a lot smaller when you're looking at budgets than we have.

And we're in a school division that prides itself with its performing arts and with its academics. When I look at the things that we offer academically at the high school and in our middle schools and in our elementary schools, we're right up there. We are right up there. We are performing with some of the best and brightest — not only in the Commonwealth, but in the country. And we cannot expect to do more with less. Education is valued. And now we need to show our students that we value what they do every day. They get up every day and they come to work, and they work and they produce. That's why we are credited. Our teachers get up every day and come to work and they work. And that's why we are accredited. And now we need to give back. We need to show them that the creative and innovative things that they are doing in those buildings are and will be rewarded, and we're going to fix those buildings. And it's not going to happen overnight. This may be a three to five-year build out, but it's going to happen.

**9. TECHNOLOGY: What are your views on the role of technology in education and what issues related to technology should the Board be responsible for addressing?**

I think we're doing an excellent job with technology. Our one-to-one initiative is really, really fantastic. It's taught me a lot. And thank you to Jeff Faust for being patient with me, but I'm learning and I'm doing and it's very interesting to me. I was away at an educational conference earlier last week and some things came up and somebody said, "Where are my 8-year-olds when I need them?" And they were talking about their 8-year-old students who could have done that technology and never thought a thing of it. And technology is the wave of the future. It will do a lot to help. But I think we must keep it in perspective and we must use it responsibly. And I think when we're using technology in the classroom whether it's the smartphone, the iPad, whether it's your laptop computer, whether it's the smart boards or whatever form of technology we're using, that it is used responsibly, that the children know how to use it, and more importantly, when you become a high school student that you understand these things don't go away. What we post on Facebook and Snapchat and Instagram — they don't go away. Colleges and universities pay people. Major corporations pay people to troll, to find out what has Leah Puryear posted on Snapchat or Instagram or Facebook? Is she the type of young lady that I want at my college and university? Is she the type of young lady that I want to work at my business or my corporation? And it has nothing to do with race or socioeconomics. It's what I have posted on social media, so we must be responsible and I feel that we are responsible in our school division. I feel our students have been given a great opportunity to be exposed to technology and how that impacts learning. And I am certain that we're going to continue to be in the forefront of that effort.

**Dodson:** *And one clarifying question, you referenced one-to-one. Could you define what that is for our listeners?*

The one-to-one initiative is that each one of the students in the high school has a — they are no longer iPads — they have laptops. And the middle school, each

student has one, but they turn theirs in at the end of the day. And so they're locked up in a safe place and then the next day they are reissued. The students in the high school have their technology and they're able to take it to and from school every day and then at the end of the year the devices are collected. Any updates, upgrades that are needed are done in order that they are reissued again the following year.

**10. 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?**

I think the achievement gaps and the opportunity gaps persist because our children are not with us 365 days a year. And so when our students are with us during the day, there are certain things that they are taught and that they are exposed to. And there's a carry over. And so when they go home, some of them will teach their families what they've learned for that day. Some of them may not be as confident in teaching their families what they've learned for the day. Other students, as we all know, come to the table with different exposures and experiences. We all learn at different rates, and so when a child is learning something, there's got to be carry over. There's got to be follow through. So there's an additional level of training that may need to occur. Maybe when we do our parent universities, we are saying, "These are the types of things that are going to be going on in your child's environment over the next semester," so that they can have a foundation and a background and feel free to ask us questions and help them learn as you're learning with your child.

We have a term in education that's called "summer melt." And so summer melt is what happens between the time you leave on the last day of school and you come back on the first day of school. How much do you retain? Are you learning during the summer? Are you reading? Are you doing things that are going to spark the little brain cells to keep going, so that when you come in from the second grade to the third grade you have retained second grade knowledge so that when you start third grade, you're starting right there. And that could be any grade — it could be high school, elementary school, or middle school. So I'm not picking on the second or third graders, but they just came to mind. Probably because I've been around a few lately. And so we want to make sure that during the summer, our children have reading lists or they have projects or they have opportunities to do things in the summer. Our Parks and Rec program partners with the city so we have the athletic fun part of the day, and then we have the academic part of the day, and all of these things come together in tandem so that our children don't lose ground during the course of the summer.

I think that we must all develop cultural sensitivity. Different cultures are acculturated based on their color, not not necessarily on their color, but on their cultures. So that when we come into the room and I'm African-American, someone is Hispanic, someone is Muslim —there may be certain cultural things that are about those individuals, but that does not mean that they are not strong

academic students. So I think we must develop a cultural sensitivity, so that we understand people from different backgrounds. One of the words I think about all the time is “soda.” We say soda in the south. I was with a very good friend this past weekend from the northeast. They call it “tonic.” And another friend of mine from the Midwest calls it “pop.” But it's all soda, so it's Coke, it's Pepsi, or whatever. So to have that sensitivity and know that when she said “tonic” she wasn't talking about tonic water, she was talking about Coke. You know, when the person said “pop” they were talking about soda pop. Certain people use the word “couch.” Other people use the word “sofa.” So different words, okay, being culturally sensitive, understanding the backgrounds of different people. I think when we understand those things, it helps break down barriers and it helps our students learn and it helps our students progress instead of setting them apart.

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

I think the school division does that with equity. Everything we do has to be equitable. If I make a decision that I want to be the next executive chef at the Ritz-Carlton, then the skills that are learned have to be the same skills that are learned by everyone in the culinary arts program so that everyone has the opportunity to become the executive chef or to own their own recording studio or to become the producer, to become the violinist, to become the next astrophysicist — whatever our students want to become. All of the things that happen, from Pre-K to 12th grade must be — have to be — equitable because if that happens, no matter what your graduation diploma says, you will be able to go out into the world and achieve.

**CLOSING:** Leah Puryear, thank you for participating in this interview with Charlottesville Tomorrow.