

Asheville City Association of Educators / NCAE PAC
Candidate Questionnaire: Asheville City Schools Board of Education
2022 Election Cycle

Please respond to each of the following questions. To be returned by email to ncae.acae@gmail.com no later than 12 PM on April 16th, 2022.

1. Provide your name as it will appear on the ballot.

<i>Name:</i> Rebecca Strimer	<i>Position Sought:</i> Board of Education
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2. Provide your phone number and email address.

<i>Phone:</i> 617-833-8651	<i>Email Address:</i> rebeccastrimer@gmail.com
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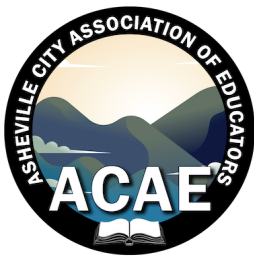
3. Tell us a little about yourself, why you are running for office, why you are qualified, and why you are the best candidate. Make sure within your answer to briefly describe your involvement with public schools in Asheville City or elsewhere.

I am Rebecca Strimer, and I am running for Asheville City Schools Board of Education because I believe that we all thrive when we look out for each other. I believe that public schools are one of the only places in our culture where our kids learn this by living into the ideas of cooperation and community.

I am the parent to two ACS students, a Hall Fletcher Elementary 5th grader and an Asheville Middle School 7th grader. I am a social work professional with over a decade of experience administering public funds and implementing high quality programs. I have dedicated my life to serving others by building authentic relationships and honoring the wisdom that people bring to their own lives. I work as a housing and financial counselor for OnTrack WNC, and I volunteer my time for local organizations that have inspired me to run for the Board of Education.

Organizations where I have served are:

- Hall Fletcher Elementary (volunteer teaching assistant)
- Hall Fletcher Elementary Parent Teacher Organization (co-president & secretary)
- Asheville City Schools Foundation (secretary & board member)
- Read 2 Succeed (treasurer & board member)
- Thrive Asheville (program participant)



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- Buncombe County Strategic Partnerships Committee (member)
 - Racial Justice Coalition (volunteer)
4. Do you support a formal structure that provides staff a voice in district-level decisions about improving services for students and staff working conditions? How would you ensure that staff had such a voice? Do you support an ultimate goal of public sector collective bargaining, including for school staff?

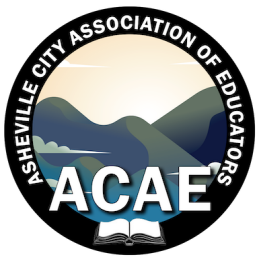
I support a formal structure that provides staff a voice in district-level decisions. I would like ACAE leadership to have a standing place on all Board of Education meeting agendas. With regular, frequent communication the board will be equipped to make decisions based on the valuable voices of teachers.

Because I have the utmost respect for teachers, I will always be honest and forthright in my communication. I will never overpromise and underdeliver. I understand that respecting teachers means being honest with them so that we can work together to find solutions. The challenges that our district faces do not have quick remedies, and I am ready for a long-term commitment to doing what it takes to build a culture of trust and transparency. I'm ready to make hard decisions that won't necessarily make everyone happy. I look forward to having teachers at the table to provide the insights the board needs to truly build the district we want for our kids.

I believe all workers deserve the right to collectively bargain. North Carolina is not friendly to labor; however, I will advocate for efforts to put our district's teachers and staff in the position to organize for fair compensation and working conditions.

5. Evaluate how well our district serves and meets the needs of our students. What accounts for the gap in achievement scores between students of different demographic groups, including the significant disparity in standardized test scores between Black and White students. How will you work locally and with the state legislature to address this disparity?

The gap in achievement scores between Black and White students is due to a gap in the opportunities that Black students have had for generations. Asheville has systematically denied its Black population access to housing, wealth, and education, and the impact on Black children has been stark. These students deserve to have schools that make them feel that they belong. It is time for our schools to be intentional about making our Black students and their families feel that schools are places that were built for them.



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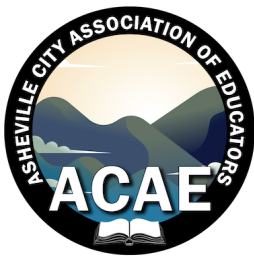
I will advocate for funding from local and state sources to ensure that we can enact systemic solutions in Asheville City Schools that build on the progress our schools are already making. For the last year I have participated in a weekly group supporting the Asheville City reparations resolution. One of the primary focus areas for the newly appointed 25-member reparations commission is education. I believe we are in a moment of opportunity where our city can step up for Black students and families in new ways. I will remain a supporter of the reparations initiative, and as a member of the Board of Education, I will engage the commission and advocate for effective approaches to enhancing education for Black students.

6. How would you advocate for our district's needs with local and state governments? Be sure to include what you will do as a public official to ensure that public education is a budget priority and that local government provides adequate funding for high-quality public schools for all children.

North Carolina legislators have created a crisis for public education. Republican-led policies are systematically starving school districts of funding while funneling resources to charter schools and opportunity grants for kids to attend private schools. These state leaders have been successful at pushing parents away from public schools. I have my eyes open about the reality of the state where we live. I will develop ongoing relationships with our state legislative delegation to push for the enactment of the Sound Basic Education Plan for All, as ordered by the court in the Leandro vs. North Carolina case. I will call on our local representatives to introduce legislation that fully funds public schools. I will advocate for the Board of Education to host community legislative forums that educate Asheville residents about the reality of these state strategies and activate them to demand fully funded schools.

Further, I will advocate for the maximization of local funding for our schools. Our district is in a financial crisis that must be addressed. The Board of Education must make difficult decisions now to rescue our district and set us on a path to recovery. Once we re-establish our district with the values of transparency, communication, and cooperation, we will be positioned to advocate for an increase in the percentage of local tax funds that are directed to Asheville City Schools. As a board member, I will work to build close working relationships with county commissioners and city councilors so that they can see and understand the ways our district is enhancing the lives of all students.

7. Describe how you believe the Board of Education should evaluate the performance of the Superintendent. Be specific about both qualitative and quantitative factors that you believe are important in evaluating the person charged with leading and managing our district.



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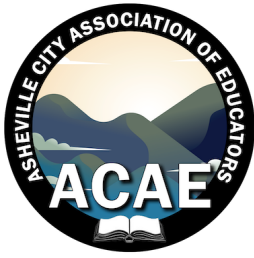
Evaluation of the superintendent must be guided by a long-term strategic plan and follow a predictable process that supports annual district goal-setting. Each year the Board of Education and the superintendent should co-create goals that guide the district and serve to deepen conversations between board members and the superintendent. The evaluation process will set clear expectations that are publicly available; it will create meaningful direction for principals and teachers because they will know what we all expect from our district's top leader. The evaluation process is about accountability for our superintendent and overall district improvement. Each year this process will allow ACS to share with our entire community what we are focused on and how we are measuring success. The board will learn throughout the year about the actions the superintendent is taking to advance the goals and the evidence that demonstrates that advancement. This will make the evaluation process a meaningful tool rather than a point in time assessment.

8. Recent discussions have emerged in NC and in our district regarding curricular content, with certain politicians, parent groups, and other outside organizations seeking to influence or restrict the educational materials that students engage with. How would you respond to parents or outside groups attempting to influence or censor curricular materials? Do you support academic freedom and trust educators to exercise professional judgment in selecting appropriate learning materials?

I fully trust educators to exercise professional judgment when it comes to teaching. If I am elected to the Board of Education I will be a stalwart supporter of teachers' right to teach. I look at the example of the recent Virginia governor's race as a lesson: a right-wing candidate pandered to the fears of parents to strip school leaders of their authority. Teachers and principals are highly educated professionals who know how to do their jobs. No matter how well-intentioned, when politicians or fearful parents make demands that fly in the face of what teachers know is best for educating students, we must stand up for those teachers.

9. Every year, each school is required to create a school improvement plan that is then presented to the district. What role do you believe individual school improvement plans have in overall district planning? How do you see using school improvement plans in your work if you are elected to the school board?

School improvement planning will align with the approach I take to superintendent evaluation, thereby creating congruence and clarity that will support the advancement of school and district goals. By that, I mean that schools will create goals for themselves that the district values and supports. Teams of school leaders, including principals, teachers, staff, and parents, will have a meaningful process to follow when our district establishes a culture that values evaluation, transparency, and learning from experience.



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School improvement plans are the best opportunity our district has for lifting up the expertise inside each building so that the learning from implementation can bolster the quality of all schools. Each school is unique with staff and students that can create success in their own context. The learning from this process can transfer in our small district with leaders that trust each other and want to learn from each other. In her book “Districts That Succeed,” Karin Chenoweth¹ posited that the most powerful question in education is “Your kids are doing better than mine; what are you doing?” She notes that the culture of a district determines whether this question is safe to ask. Our district has an opportunity to lean into the process and products of the school improvement planning structure to allow excellence to flow within a school and throughout our district.

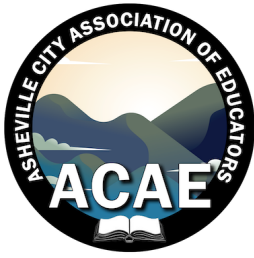
10. This year, public school staff have seen a significant increase in the mental health needs of students. How would you address the need for quality mental health services in Asheville City Schools?

The Asheville Middle School health center is a step in the right direction. Our district can leverage the resources in our community to more effectively serve our students’ mental health needs. Our children are living through a slow-moving traumatic experience called Covid, and we must not negate the very real challenges that they face as they navigate these uncertain times. As with any trauma, students will respond in ways that may appear as bad behavior, sadness, or an inability to focus. We must enhance our school’s access to mental health professionals and students’ ability to make meaningful use of their services.

11. What is your long-term vision for our district in 5 years? In 10 years? As a part of your vision, please discuss your vision for retention and recruitment of both certified and classified public school staff.

Because of the financial crisis facing Asheville City Schools, I envision a plan for the future in three phases: rescue, recover, and thrive. Once we rescue the system, that is, we set a budget that will allow for solvent operations, then we start the work of recovery.

One strategy to rescue the district must be to address the size of central office staff; we can streamline central office staff to ensure sound leadership without excessive spending. I estimate that we could save at least \$500,000 by right-sizing central office staff to align more closely with the per pupil ratio for administrators of Buncombe County Schools (that is, 18 top leaders in BCS central office for 22,000 students compared to the current 15 top leaders in ACS central office for 4,200 students)². I also have looked at comparably sized districts outside North Carolina and saw none with as many high level administrators as ACS.



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Our recovery phase must also include thoughtful strategic planning, and board members must be ready to manage the herculean task of that planning while also establishing a budget that will save our district from the consequences of spending beyond our means. This will require teamwork and cooperation. We will engage our entire community in the strategic planning process where many voices will come together to solidify the vision, values, and tasks that will set our course. In recent years, ACS has engaged stakeholders in the process of renaming Lucy S. Herring Elementary School; this process can serve as a guide. We have the tools and experience we need to invite parents and community leaders into deep conversations that will yield direction for our future.

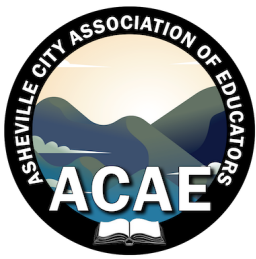
In 5 years we will be a healthy, vibrant school district with schools where students feel a sense of pride and belonging. By 2032, I envision that Asheville City Schools will be a model school district. We will have strong leadership from a superintendent with roots in our community and commitment to serve long-term. District leaders and the Board of Education will empower principals to lead their schools and listen to teachers who are experts on their students. Students will excel in school environments that value their humanity and make them feel a sense of belonging. Kids will feel pride in their school community. Teachers and staff will want to work for Asheville City Schools and build careers in our district because they will know they are valued. Their compensation will be fair, they will be respected, and they will feel that they belong.

This semester, over 75% of ACS staff and hundreds of community allies signed a petition calling on the school board and county commission to address a number of issues listed [here](#). The next three questions directly relate to our petition.

12. Would you advocate with the County Commissioners for a budget that allows ACS to pay a living wage to all staff? Why or why not?

I will advocate for a living wage for all ACS staff using all strategies available, including advocating to the county commissioners. Developing an effective working relationship with the commission is key to our success. The Board of Education will be a seven-member body that must set the example of cooperation and collaboration. This orientation will make us well-positioned to articulate how and why increasing funds for living wage salaries is feasible. Currently, the commissioners doubt that district leaders are trustworthy or have a vision. It is time to change that.

Recently ACS finance staff proposed reducing the pay to classified staff by rearranging the payroll structure as a means to balance the budget. I find it unacceptable that the top strategy



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given to the Board of Education was to reduce the pay of districts' lowest paid staff. We will not balance the budget on the backs of hardworking staff.

13. Asheville City Schools is considering closing 4 Pre-K classes for the following year in order to save local funds. Do you believe we should continue this funding? Why or why not?

I believe that investments in Pre-K yield big returns, and I will advocate for Asheville City Schools to support the maximum number of Pre-K classrooms possible. As we address the necessary financial crisis with a rescue plan, we may temporarily be unable to support the number of Pre-K classes that we want long-term; however, with careful fiscal oversight, the opportunity to invest in Pre-K will remain. We must explore all available options for funding Pre-K, including market rate tuition for private pay families and advocacy efforts to increase funding from the state and federal governments to levels that cover the costs of the programming. Evidence is clear that access to Pre-K is a key strategy for addressing the opportunity gap that persists between Black and White students in our district, and I will advocate for immediately increasing access to Pre-K for children in public housing communities.

14. Asheville's supplement for teachers is significantly less than supplements for other districts with similar costs of living. How should Asheville address this disparity?

Teacher compensation is a key strategy for Asheville City Schools to recruit and retain the best educators. Asheville is an increasingly expensive city with the highest housing costs in the state. While our supplement rates may be aligned closely with Buncombe County Schools, the cost to live in Asheville exceeds the cost to live in the surrounding county. I believe that competitive compensation for teachers will be a key factor in stabilizing our district and moving on to a thriving phase. Teaching professionals deserve compensation that allows them to live where they work. Through streamlining in multiple areas, including reduction of central office staff, and by investing in a culture of trust and transparency we will realize savings and adopt an operational approach that can support an increase in the supplement.

Footnotes:

¹ Chenowith, Karen. *Districts that Succeed: Breaking the Correlation Between Race, Poverty, and Achievement*. (Harvard Education Press, 2021), 16.

² Sources for estimate include [Sunshine Request](#), [ACS Organizational Chart](#), and [BCS Organizational Chart](#).