

Andrew WYMER

For D65 SCHOOL BOARD

Responses to Questions from Black SonRISE and Kuumba Evanston

Short Statement:

As a candidate for the D65 school board, I am committed to equity in our district.

This commitment requires equitably prioritizing resources and support for historically under-resourced, racially-minoritized communities.

My approach includes creating a new strategic plan. This plan would focus on measurable equity goals, addressing systemic resource gaps, and ensuring a diverse, well-supported teaching staff. I advocate for a racial equity lens in all district decisions, even amid financial challenges.

For more information or to talk more about any of my answers, please reach me at wymersford65@gmail.com.

Click on the question to go to the answer

Student Achievement and Equity

The achievement gap between Black students and their counterparts has continued to grow in terms of percentage performing math and reading at their appropriate grade level. What is your specific plan to close that gap?

How would you maintain an emphasis on equity in district decision-making in the face of our current fiscal challenges and potential cuts in federal funding assistance?

What is your position on the district's adoption of standards-based grading? Are there any improvements or changes you would make to the system?

Historically there has been a 70%-30% or a 60%-40% division between white children and Black children in D65. How would you address this issue to ensure that all groups are equally represented with equal access at all district 65 schools?

Historically there has been a disproportionate representation of Black children, especially boys, being placed in special education. How would you ensure that the IEP isn't a life sentence for these students? What measures would you take to ensure that students are moving back into and have access to regular education classes?

How should D65 incentivize Black educators to go into teaching? Is equity at the forefront of the recruiting process?

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What is your position on the Foster School construction project?

What is the District's responsibility to provide and implement research-based based effective early intervention to our most vulnerable learners? (reading, math, writing, language)

How can we ensure that families, teachers, and students have a voice in selecting culturally relevant curriculum?

What is your position on the current balance in D65 between SEL and the district's expectations for student academic achievement?

Student Achievement and Equity

The achievement gap between Black students and their counterparts has continued to grow in terms of percentage performing math and reading at their appropriate grade level. What is your specific plan to close that gap?

As a D65 school board member, I will insist on two things.

First, I will insist that we have a new 2025-2030 strategic plan with equity as a primary goal. This plan must be communicated clearly, with specific and measurable goals. The administration and board can be held accountable to these goals. I will hold myself and other board members accountable to these goals. I will hold the district accountable to them. If we miss a benchmark, we need to evaluate why we missed it. Then we can make the right changes as they are identified.

Second, I will talk about these racialized gaps in educational outcomes as *resource* gaps. These gaps require intentionally sharing additional resources in historically and systemically under-resourced communities to achieve an equitable outcome. These systemic resource gaps must be addressed holistically. I will work toward closing these gaps by offering the highest level possible of early childhood education to support students and families. I will support investing in support systems for teachers. Teachers will need to navigate racial differences critically. We need to ensure our teachers and staff more robustly reflect the racial diversity of our community, develop and deploy equitable disciplinary procedures, and provide the highest quality of literacy and math support possible. I also support the completion and ongoing success of Foster School.

How would you maintain an emphasis on equity in district decision-making in the face of our current fiscal challenges and potential cuts in federal funding assistance?

In the words of 1990s Nike advertising that I grew up with, "just do it." We need to run every decision that is made through a racial equity lens that attends to the impact of D65's decisions on racially-minoritized communities here in Evanston. Those decisions must be equitable!

What will happen with federal funding is hard to predict right now, and we know that the Republican party has been targeting DEI in a host of ways including race, gender, sexuality, and immigration status. Until we know more, we need to focus on continuing to right the financial

ship. Then we will be as resilient as possible against targeted cuts by an administration that might just follow through on policies in Project 2025. Right now we have to focus on what we know and what we can address right now.

What is your position on the district's adoption of standards-based grading? Are there any improvements or changes you would make to the system?

As an educator myself, I try to remain open to new approaches to assessment and grading. Standards-based grading makes expectations and assessments more clear. This clarity can contribute to more equitable outcomes in education.

We need to continue to support our teachers to ensure that they are receiving support as they learn about implicit bias and how to address that in their teaching and grading. I say this as a graduate-level educator for over ten years. I try to always evaluate my own grading, even as I grade students. As with all grading systems, we still need to ensure a high level of standards and assessment in the classroom. We need to ensure that enough resources are given to students and teachers during the formative stages of student assessment prior to a summative issuing of a grade so that students can realistically succeed or excel at meeting those standards.

Historically there has been a 70%-30% or a 60%-40% division between white children and Black children in D65. How would you address this issue to ensure that all groups are equally represented with equal access at all District 65 schools?

I will primarily be concerned with equitable representation and equitable access as opposed to equal representation and equal access. For example, building Foster School and the shift away from bussing Black students from the Fifth Ward to schools in white communities, means the diversity gap in some schools will likely increase. In light of this it will be crucial that the district has a strong sense of what is happening at each school, so our values can be aligned throughout the district. There should be some common threads noticed in each school that bind us together as one great school district.

I believe the issues of representation and access also extend to include principals, staff, and teachers at each school. One key way we can address this is to ensure that our principals, teachers, and staff reflect or even magnify the broad diversity of our community at every school.

We need a hiring process that recruits culturally responsive, qualified teachers to teach in our diverse community. Additionally, at the elementary level, this may unfold in ways that are new for the district. It will be important for each school's leadership, the district's culture and climate team, and the board to ensure equitable policies are developed as any new issues arise.

This is why it is so important that the curriculum shows and respects diversity and that there is professional development training to teach educators ways to teach and approach curriculum with a culturally responsive lens. It is crucial that DEI training is ongoing for new and retained educators and staff members.

Historically there has been a disproportionate representation of Black children, especially boys, being placed in special education. How would you ensure that the IEP isn't a life sentence for these students? What measures would you take to ensure that students are moving back into and have access to regular education classes?

This disproportionate representation of Black children in special education has been a longstanding problem at D65 and beyond. It is not acceptable.

We must attend to the potential impact of anti-Black bias from the start with assessments and referrals. We must ensure that district staff and teachers continue to increase awareness of racial bias, including how there is a disproportionate representation of Black children in special education. This is one way that the inclusion of students with IEPs in general education can play an important role in ensuring that each student can thrive in their school.

The board needs to have disaggregated quarterly progress monitoring of IEPs for racially minoritized students in place to support and hold accountable the administration. We need to hear what instructional methods are being used, what is being taught, and what is being measured, which demonstrates student progress.

How should D65 incentivize Black educators to go into teaching? Is equity at the forefront of the recruiting process?

A key factor in ensuring we can close the racial education gap is hiring and supporting Black teachers. This is a growth area for D65. The latest statistics that I see show that 12.9% of our teachers are Black. That is below the rate of Evanston's population, which is close to 15%

Black. We need to make sure our teachers robustly represent the diversity of our community. This is the bare minimum we should aim for. Statistics show that hiring and supporting racially minoritized teachers can be an important step toward closing the resource gap.

As board candidates, there are certain policies, procedures, and documents that we cannot see. Additionally, there are always the unspoken policies that operate in any organization. This is one of the issues I want to investigate early on to get a real sense of how we recruit, how we communicate about ourselves as a district to those we recruit, and what supports we provide to achieve our hiring goals. So I can't really say where equity currently fits into the recruiting process, except how it emerges in any general process.

We need to continue to build a culture of equity at D65 that ensures that we are a desirable location to work. We need to be a stable, supportive environment that Black teachers can see as a career-long location of employment.

In what ways have you contributed to and been involved with racial and social justice work in Evanston?

I am deeply committed to racial equity work in my work and in my personal life. Here is just a snapshot:

- My extensive research and writing deeply engages critical race theory with attention to religious practices.
- I have served on the Oakton Elementary PTA Executive Board and as the Oakton Elementary PTA Equity Project (PEP) representative.
- I took part in a Next Steps Anti-Racism cohort of teachers and parents from Oakton Elementary.
- I currently serve on the executive board of the Evanston/North Shore NAACP branch where I chair the Environmental and Climate Justice Committee.
- I was recently deeply honored to be recognized with the 2024 President's Award by the branch.
- I convened the Evanston Environmental Justice Coalition prior to its current reorganization for two years.
- I serve on the Cook County District 13 Environmental Justice Task Force

- I serve on the City of Evanston's Environmental Equity Investigation Leadership Committee.
- I was honored to recently support the great work of Evanston Cradle to Career as a member of their 2025 Systems Change Grants Selection Committee.
- I previously served on the Ridgeville Park District's Racial Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee.

What is your understanding of the historic educational system/experience in Evanston?

I have greatly benefited from the research of Dino Robinson, the founding director at Shorefront Legacy Center, and Jenny Thompson at the Evanston History Center. Their report, "Evanston Policies and Practices Directly Affecting the African American Community," details the history of racism in Evanston. There is a key section in that report detailing anti-Black discrimination in education. This report has helped me more fully understand the longstanding history of racial bias in education in Evanston and the past and ongoing struggle of our Black community to secure equitable educational outcomes. (I have also done additional work to understand an overview of the history of racial integration in Evanston and detailed histories of Foster School.)

We have a history of racism and bias in D65 that continues to unfold, and recent sustained efforts by the board and superintendents over roughly the last eight to ten years to address this are still emerging within the broad scheme of things. This history of racial bias requires a sustained commitment to addressing racial inequality in education for the long haul in D65. I am ready to bring that commitment to the board.

Governance and Accountability

What is the role of a school board member?

We need school board members who are not afraid to ask tough questions, to serve with integrity and honesty, and who never forget that in this capacity you serve the students of this community.

The key tasks of a board and its members are to help set the strategic plan of the district and to hold the administration of the district accountable to that plan. The role of a school board member is to work in the best interest of the entire community to ensure that the school district remains committed to its mission to serve our community. We need a board of seven diverse members that can bring our community's aspirations to bear in the life of our district together. Board members are responsible for being available for conversations with the community and building policy that supports the community. This role requires a commitment to listening so that what emerges for the board reflects what is best for our community.

What informs your decision-making process?

My personal decision-making processes are informed by my commitments to equity, mutuality, and pragmatism, which include relationships with people who are in historically minoritized groups.

First I seek the equitable well-being of my community. When I make decisions, I always intend to include an equity lens, to make sure my decisions will positively impact persons who are racially minoritized, queer, disabled, or have any other marginalized identity. I consistently bring that lens to bear in the organizations in which I work and volunteer. Those lenses are informed by real relationships with people who make up these categories.

Second, I try to see myself as one part of a broader whole. I also try to engage in conversations in ways that lead to a communal viewpoint. Decisions and conversations about our district need to move beyond "I" to "we," looking at the impact of decisions beyond the personal level to the community. I am committed to making decisions that are best for the "we." My decision-making process is also informed by pragmatism in that an effective school board needs to be adaptable and flexible, identifying solutions that will bring tangible results.

We cannot change our district overnight, but we can keep making realistic, practical, and measurable steps toward change right now.

How should the board and district administrators be held accountable for priorities facing the district?

Accountability is important to me. We need a community-informed strategic plan that accurately encapsulates the aspirations of our community. Then, the board and the district administrators should be evaluated for how well they formulate and achieve that plan, or, when goals are missed, how well they respond to and learn from negative outcomes. That would mean accountability.

Our current 2020-2025 strategic plan has no measurable outcomes or benchmarks that are public-facing on the website, and one of our five strategic goals for 2020-2025 was "fiscal management." It is fair to say that the current board and previous boards did not achieve this goal, though the current board is taking significant steps to address this crisis which the incoming board will benefit from. District administrators should first and foremost be evaluated by the board on how well they implemented and managed the strategic plan, but we don't currently have a strategic plan communicated in such a way that this accountability is possible.

We need to formulate a 2025-2030 strategic plan with specific, measurable benchmarks this year that will be a contract with the community. The board needs to hold itself accountable to that plan, asking when each major policy decision comes up how that impacts the strategic plan. It also needs to hold the administrator of the district accountable to that plan. There has been a breakdown of transparency and accountability that the new board must repair through a community-informed strategic plan that transparently identifies key benchmarks and outcomes that are specific, measurable, and achievable.

A current board member recently stated during a meeting that the current superintendent was to be commended for not “sweeping the current financial challenges under the rug, which she could have done, but facing them head-on”. What is your view of the oversight role that the board has regarding the district leadership team?

My philosophy of oversight holds support and accountability hand in hand.

The board has direct oversight (and hiring and firing responsibility) of the superintendent. It is the board's job to hold the superintendent accountable to and support them in fulfilling the district's strategic plan.

The district leadership team reports to the superintendent. While there are indirect mechanisms for the board to exercise oversight of the leadership team, a healthy board will focus on supporting and holding the superintendent accountable. When issues arise these need to be addressed through the board's oversight of the superintendent.

What is your position on the potential merger of D65 and D202?

I find the idea of a potential merger between D65 and D202 attractive. However, it is neither immediately practical nor possible, especially in light of D65's current structural deficits. During my term on the board, I would like to focus on what is possible. D65 can resolve its structural deficits while continuing to address the crisis of racial inequality in education. Over time it is possible that D65 could get to a financial and organizational stability that would make conversations about a potential merger possible. I will work toward that stability.

District Priorities and Policies

What are the top priorities facing the district?

I believe that equity must be a top priority.

We must attend to the structural deficits and ensure that we foster an organizational culture of financial discipline, accountability, and sustainability.

We must build on the significant steps already being taken by the current board. Now is the time to resolve these longstanding structural deficits, and I am committed to being a member of the board who insists on continuing to make these hard decisions now.

We must continue to work for measurable and achievable equity outcomes that ensure that all children in D65 really means all. I am deeply committed to working for equitable outcomes for racially minoritized, queer, disabled, immigrant, low-income, and multilingual students and students with any other marginalized identity.

Additionally, the 2025-2030 strategic plan development process should begin right now, in January 2025. We need to create a process in which the administration and board listen to the community, and formulate a rigorous strategic plan that will guide the district for the next five years. This will be an important step in rebuilding trust and keeping our focus on continuing to build a more equitable future.

Do you believe that Northwestern University should play a role in addressing the academic achievement gap in D65? If not, why not? If so, how so?

I believe that Northwestern University and the City of Evanston have a powerful role to play in addressing racial inequality in education. This is our entire community's problem that is connected to longstanding histories of racial bias in Evanston. Northwestern and the City of Evanston are also deeply interwoven with these histories. Studies have shown that when racial disparities in education are addressed holistically throughout a community they can be successfully addressed more quickly. I would like D65 to collaborate with Northwestern and the City of Evanston on potential partnerships that could have a high impact on our community and be mutually beneficial, but I am also realistic about how challenging this will be.

What is your position on the residency requirement for D65 senior cabinet leaders? Beyond a residency requirement, what is your expectation for senior cabinet leaders to demonstrate Evanston community involvement?

I believe D65 superintendent and D65 senior cabinet leaders need to live in Evanston.

I hope that D65 can be a desirable, stable place of employment, where staff, teachers, and administrators can see themselves for some time. As someone who has lived in Evanston for ten years now, I know the difference it makes living in the city. There are connections that are made, history that is learned, and involvement that is possible when you are deeply embedded in a neighborhood and community. Additionally, our senior cabinet leaders should follow a clear policy about community involvement and how that will be directly evaluated in their overall job performance. Evanston/Skokie community involvement is a key means of outreach for the school, demonstrating D65's commitment to the community, and building networks of connection and trust.

What is your position on the Foster School construction project?

I wholeheartedly support the completion of Foster School and the return of a walkable elementary school to the Fifth Ward. This is sixty years too late. I will do everything I can to support its completion and thriving.

There are currently no graduation requirements or minimum attendance requirements in D65. What is your position on graduation requirements?

Graduation and attendance requirements are matters that I would be open to engaging with the D202 and D65 joint committee. I would like to hear more about what challenges students are facing as they move from D65 to D202. Should graduation and attendance requirements be seen as an effective means of helping students succeed in their transition to high school, it should be developed and implemented by D65.

What is the District's responsibility to provide and implement research-based effective early intervention to our most vulnerable learners? (reading, math, writing, language)

Our responsibility is to provide the most effective research-based intervention to our most vulnerable learners. We must do it as early as possible to close racial disparities in education outcomes.

Research shows that early interventions and the provision of holistic supports throughout the educational system are crucial for closing disparities in outcomes. I have heard firsthand from guardians what a huge difference this can make in a student's journey. And ultimately, isn't our responsibility to the students of our district?

How can we ensure that families, teachers, and students have a voice in selecting culturally relevant curriculum?

The district's curriculum and policy committee should be the first step in ensuring that there is significant and sustained community input on curricular changes by families, teachers, and students.

As a board member, I will ask when curricular proposals come to the board what community engagement there has been. Ensuring that the district has a long-term plan for the intentional and thoughtful selection and assessment of curriculum will be crucial in allowing for community input. I also hope that the community could be involved not just in selecting

culturally relevant curricula but also in evaluating that curriculum as its use unfolds in the district.

We need to do everything we can to ensure that each student can see an equitable and honest representation of themselves and their community in the curriculum.

What is your position on the current balance in D65 between SEL and the district's expectations for student academic achievement?

I hope that we can have a holistic view of the education of our children. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is so crucial for educating whole human beings ready to live life to its fullest. This thriving does not need to be situated against academic achievement. SEL can be integrated into helping students learn how to learn and achieve and to reflect on the impact of that learning on their own sense of self in community.