

Responses cannot be edited

# Gail Pough

## Community Led School Board

### Questionnaire

This questionnaire was put together by a coalition of non-partisan, non-profit organizations seeking to provide the community with an opportunity to meet, engage and learn from all school board candidates. All candidates running for Denver Public School Board and Aurora Public School Board are being sent the questionnaire on the same date with two weeks to submit their responses.

The questionnaire was put together by Inspire Colorado, YAASPA, and Padres y Jóvenes Unidos.

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**In a few sentences, describe your vision for the students and families you desire to serve.**

I envision a district in which every single student, from every single family across the district, has the opportunity to earn a world class education regardless of their race, ethnicity, their documentation status, or what neighborhood they grow up in, or how much money their parents make. APS has made improvement, but our work is far from done. We are the most diverse city in the Rocky Mountains, but we can't call ourselves a great school district until every parent is confident that their child can earn a great education in every neighborhood in Aurora. I am running so that parents have a seat at the table and the ability to advocate for our students and our families. I fought for my kids to get a great education in APS, and I will fight for your family, too.

**In your opinion, what top two changes should be made on a state and local level regarding public education?**

My number one priority for students in APS is that they have the opportunity to earn their education at a high-quality public school. School quality is my number one priority, because the first function of our school district absolutely has to be educating all of our children. Graduation rates are up by 23%, but we can't afford to go backwards, and we can't leave a single kid behind. As a parent, I know how important it is for Aurora families to be able to make real choices about which APS school to send their child to. As a district, we need to lead with high expectations for every child, with accountability

to families for educating their students, with transparency to every taxpayer, and with clear communication and great options for every family. Our district has serious educational inequities based on geography — all students in APS need access to quality schools, not just students who grow up in certain zip codes. This inequity creates opportunity gaps which lead to achievement gaps — but there is real work that we can do to close these disparities. When I am elected, I will focus on improving school quality in APS by 1) pushing the district to expand access to excellent early childhood education and full-day kindergarten, because we know that increasing support for our youngest students is the smartest investment we can make as a community; and 2) ensure that APS is able to communicate with all families by pushing the district to be more accessible to working parents whose schedules make it hard for them to attend events after school, to restoring funding to translation services, and to make sure that every APS parent has the clear, transparent information they need to make informed choices for their families.

**If you are elected to the school board, how will you ensure there is progress toward racial equity for students of color?**

The systematic disenfranchisement of our students of color manifests in multiple complex ways, so it's going to take some serious work to break down the multiple barriers affecting our kids. I'll say it again — Aurora is the most diverse city in the Rocky Mountains. Our students are African-American, Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean, they are latino and Bhutanese and Nepali, and a one-size fits all approach to the opportunity gaps affecting our students of color won't work, because different communities of students are facing unique barriers to their full enfranchisement in our education system including the pervasive racism of low expectations, funding disparities contributing to a lack of translation and transportation services, discipline policies that disproportionately suspend and expel students of color, and more. I recently attended a community forum hosted by RISE, where a research from the University of Colorado presented research based on interviews with immigrant families. For those families, the two biggest barriers to their involvement in the school system were a lack of information from the district, and language barriers. For some of our immigrant students, the biggest barrier they are currently facing is a lack of transparency from the district — communications sent home in a language that their parents cannot read mean that parents cannot keep track of their child's progress, how their child's school is doing generally, and how they can best advocate for their students. For many of our students, a discipline system that

disproportionately suspends and expels students of color — and young black boys in particular — means that an entire community of young children, babies, are being removed from their classrooms, missing out on learning time, internalizing the notion that they are bad kids, and becoming far more likely to drop out of school and later be incarcerated. We must eliminate exclusionary discipline practices in APS — particularly for our young students. I would be proud to sponsor such a resolution when I am elected. As a parent organizer with Together Colorado, I worked shoulder-to-shoulder with parent organizers from black and latino communities to push on school districts to address issues affecting our children. I have also been meeting with the very engaged parents of RISE, who represent many different nationalities and languages, and many of whom are Spanish-speaking moms. And I know that for many of our immigrant students, the idea of concentrating on math class feels next to impossible when you are afraid of ICE raids during school pick-up and drop-off, or of mom and dad not being home when you get home from school. I worked RISE to draft the resolution in support of our immigrant students, and my daughter and I both testified, because it's important for our family to stand with all families. Aurora is a segregated city — there are no current board members from my area, Del Mar circle, currently on the board. We can't tell families where to live, and we know that American schools zoned by neighborhood and funded through local property taxes will always be segregated and disproportionately funded. I hope that Aurora neighborhoods will continue to integrate, but I know that we need to carefully consider whether or not school boundaries are perpetuating decades of segregation, and whether options like better transportation so that kids from different neighborhoods can move more freely between the district would work. What would it look like if kids from NW Aurora and kids from out by Iliff Ave and Buckley AFB sat next to each other in school? I could go on, but I'll add that finally, as a mom of two students of color — I'm going to fight against the harmful racism of low expectations. I know that every single kid in APS is capable of learning and thriving in college and whatever career they choose. I won't settle for less.

What do you think needs to be done to increase access to programs like ASCENT and concurrent enrollment for students of color and lower income students?

We need to ensure that every student in the district knows about these programs and understands what these programs are. Distribution of the program needs to be equitable. The conversation about these programs needs to begin in middle school so students (along with their parents) can begin thinking about the classes they may want to take so they can begin mapping out a clear path in order to gain the benefits of these programs. These programs can't be a secret, they must be promoted by all the schools in the district and offered to ALL students. Concurrent enrollment is a great way for students to earn college credit while still in highschool, and my own daughters participated in these programs. The benefits are really three-fold: first, students are able to earn college credits for free while they're still in the K12 system; second, students are then able to start college with those credits already earned, which saves families money in college tuition; and third, this allows students to enter college with the confidence that college-level courses are manageable. We know that this increases college completion rates for our kids. Again, this comes down to high expectations for all kids — I resist efforts to track our kids into “college kids” and kids who adults think can't go to college. Concurrent enrollment needs to be available at every high school, for every student.

How does your school district need to improve in its process of ensuring all students graduate ready for college/career?

As noted above, expanding access to concurrent enrollment is important. I was really pleased to learn that something like ¼ of students at our community college are concurrent enrollment students. We've already got some great partnerships with Pickens technical college, and I want to expand those partnerships even further so that our students who choose to go straight to career can graduate with apprenticeships with our local unions — trade unions, our firefighters union, etc. We also know that we need to start having conversations with students and families about college starting in kindergarten, and that we need to believe as a district that college is attainable for every student. I'll add that recruiting and retaining amazing teachers teachers of color will help us reduce the gaps between college attendance and graduation among our white students and students of color. It might look like partnering with traditional teacher training programs, and it might look like an Aurora Teacher Residency, like Denver has

had for some years. And finally, and particularly as we work to recruit and retain teachers of color and other teachers from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds, it might look like active hiring efforts into a district that, again, should serve as a model nationally for serving students of color, emerging multilingual students, immigrant students, and refugee students without opportunity or achievement gaps, driven by leaders who have high expectations for success for all kids.

## How would you determine top budget priorities?

First, I will confer with district staff to understand their process in creating the budget. Then I will assess the budget for priorities — in a district that doesn't have enough money, in a state that doesn't have enough money, ultimately we are going to have to make prioritization decisions (I was disappointed to see fund reduction for translation services, for example). I will also engage parents and community members to discuss their priorities, to allow parents and community members to give their approval, concerns, and suggestions. APS spends funds our students at \$7,920.49 per student, according to the budget adopted in June. The budget also states that "if sufficient revenue were available in Colorado's General Fund, APS would receive \$8,920 per pupil." Per pupil spending reported by the district is an average, though, and doesn't address the individual needs of students. I also want to know how much money different PTAs are raising for their schools. With regard to teacher salary, the CDE says the average salary in APS is \$54,230.20 per year, but that doesn't go into detail on length of tenure or degrees that increase pay detailed in the district salary schedule. Finally, while we know that funding is a challenge, budgets are moral documents, and sometimes it really is a matter of prioritization. As I mentioned above, early childhood education and expanded translation services are priorities for me. We have to fully fund our emerging multilingual students through great English language instruction, and transitional language supports so that students who are learning English don't fall behind in their other classes. We know that ECE is one of the absolute best investments we can make in our kids' futures. It would be great to have more funding, and in the meantime, my priority is funding proven programs that shrink opportunity gaps and ensure that APS is a district where all kids can succeed.

How would you advocate for adequate and equitable funding for your district on a state and local level?

Our current state formula is obviously too small — we know that Colorado funds our schools at one of the lowest rates in the country. But our state funding is fairly successful at being distributed on an equitable, per-pupil basis. The larger challenges, to me, come from the way our districts are funded locally, based on local property taxes. This creates a system in which wealthier areas have better-funded schools, and areas with local property values, whether in Aurora or in our rural districts, really struggle to raise the local dollars to ensure that they have access to great programs. When the state funding isn't sufficient, local districts have to make up those additional funds through the mill levies, and some districts, including APS, really struggle to make ends meet for their students, families, and educators. We need to work with our legislators in order to find ways that these inequities can be eliminated. In the meantime, as I mentioned above, it's going to be about fighting for our most historically marginalized kids to receive the funding that they deserve. Budgets are about priorities, and equity for ALL of our kids is a #1 priority for me.

What role do you believe families and students should play in implementing district and school policies?

As a parent organizer, and as a mom, my top priority has always been mobilizing families to eliminate achievement gaps that leave students of color behind, ensure that all kids have access to a great education, and ensure that parent voices are being sought out and taken seriously. Parents and families are our strongest asset. Our schools exist to serve students and their families! I get frustrated when I hear people talk about how some parents won't get involved — working families work hard so that they can provide for their children. When I am on the board, I will work with the district to ensure all families are served — that means translation services, child care at board meetings, and part of our culture should be being accessible to families at all times. It means that I will come to you, and not just say that you didn't come to me. There are so many kinds of families in Aurora, and when different cultures and ethnicities are represented, we can create change, foster innovation, and embrace creativity.

## How would you work with schools to address the school-to-prison pipeline?

The ideal district discipline policy would ensure that Colorado's Smart School Discipline bill is being adhered to, placing an emphasis on restorative practices and on keeping students in their classrooms where they belong. With children of color in mind, as children of color, and black boys in particular, the most likely to be suspended and expelled at very early ages, the bill can ensure that kids stay in school so they can work toward an excellent future. In addition, I want to make sure that the bill reaches its full potential in Aurora Public Schools. I would want to shorten the APS school discipline guide to ensure that the rules are clear and coherent, and differentiated based on age — as a parent, I know that kindergarteners and high schoolers don't deserve the same punishments for, say, throwing a pen at a classmate. DPS passed a policy this year to eliminate suspension and expulsion for young students, and I absolutely want to consider that policy when I am elected in Aurora. Also, I want to make sure that it is transcribed in the many languages spoken by APS families so that parents and children fully understand the conduct rules of the district. Discipline is serious, and we need every adult in the district to understand the seriousness with which we need to consider how we discipline our kids. We can't allow our school-to-prison pipeline to become a school-to-deportation pipeline in Aurora. We need to focus on restorative discipline and great socioemotional supports for our kids, not on punishment, not on exclusion, and absolutely not on removing kids from their communities.

## What is your position on charter schools?

I believe in supporting schools that serve all students. Colorado law allows for charter schools, and it's the obligation of the local school boards to hold high standards for approving contracts for charters that apply. In addition, oversight and high standards must continue to be monitored through the duration of the contract. When I am elected, I will hold all schools, charter or otherwise, to high standards for serving all kids.

What steps would you take to ensure that the district curriculum be culturally responsive to the needs of students of color at all grade levels?

I am the descendent of pioneers of Color who came to Bijou Basin in the late 1800s. My great-great-grandfather was a Spanish Jew, and my great-great-grandmother was an African American. That's the story of Colorado, to me. That's my Colorado history. As a parent organizer, I organized alongside immigrant parents whose culture and language was different from my own — our organizing efforts and our community were strengthened for us learning one another's stories. As a school board member, I will fight for our students to learn from a curriculum that is based in fact, that challenges them, that does not censor their thoughts or the materials that they have access to. We cannot skirt over the hard parts of our history, it's ours, and we need to name it, know it, learn from it, and expand it so that all of our students can learn their histories. When I am elected, I will support greater autonomy at the school level for our leaders to create culturally responsive lessons for their unique students — and I will support resolutions and policies at the district level to support culturally responsive curricula district-wide. We can't let our school system be one more manifestation of a dominant culture aiming for a one-size-fits-all education for one type of student. As I mentioned above, Aurora is the single most diverse city in the Rocky Mountains — we should be a national model for curricula that honors and inspires all of our students. One of the duties outlined for school boards under state law is to approve curricula — and we should be setting a high bar for the integration of black, Chicano, Somali, and Tibetan history, literature, etc seamlessly into our existing curriculum from K through 12. Our students thrive as scholars as people, and as members of our Aurora community when they can see themselves in their educations, and when they know that APS is a place where they fully belong. The same systemic racism that results in our black and brown students being subject to exclusionary discipline at higher rates results in them and their cultures being erased from our history books and reading lists. We should be writing the book on how to do it better.

## What would you do to hire and retain more teachers of color?

As a woman of color and a mom to two daughters who were students of color in APS, I KNOW that we need to ensure that our schools should reflect the communities that they are in. Pathways should be provided for paraprofessional and mentors to move into teacher positions, and it is important that we work with local organizations to ensure that the diversity of the community is reflected in district hiring efforts. We do not have enough teachers of color in APS. APS should be the most desirable district in the state for teachers of color to come work in. It's going to take partnerships with our institutions of higher education, grow-our-own efforts, maybe an Aurora Teacher Residency. And, once teachers of color are hired, we need to ensure that they have the tools they need in order to be successful, and we need to make sure they are being supported and that celebrating diversity is embedded into our culture.

## Do you support the establishment of Haven Schools in accordance with the Safe and Welcoming School District Resolution adopted by the School Board?

Yes! I mentioned above that I worked with parents at RISE to draft the resolution, and my daughter and I both testified on behalf of the resolution because it's important for our family to stand with all Aurora families. I'll add that APS is a district for all students, and that as a mom, I have always fought to protect my kids from anyone who wants to hurt them our our family. Schools are for learning, growing, and nurturing, and not for ICE raids. When I am elected, I will fight with everything I have to protect every single one of our APS kids from harm.