



2014 Frederick County Council Candidate Questionnaire

CANDIDATE: Jessica Fitzwater

OFFICE (DISTRICT OR AT LARGE): County Council, District 4

CAMPAIGN ADDRESS: Friends of Jessica Fitzwater, P.O. Box 661, New Market, MD 21774

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CAMPAIGN TREASURER: Karen Yoho

I confirm that the responses provided here are my official positions in seeking local office, and I understand that FCTA reserves the right to share my responses with members and interested parties.

CANDIDATE SIGNATURE: _____ **DATE SUBMITTED:** _____

*Candidates: In order to be considered for a recommendation, you must respond to each of the questions. Clarifications, explanations, and other information may be attached, but please be certain to indicate clearly the questions(s) to which you refer. Please return your completed and signed questionnaire to **the Frederick County Teachers Association.***

Frederick County Council Candidate Biography

Education:

- 2010, Hood College, M.S. in Educational Leadership, *summa cum laude*
- 2005, St. Mary's College of Maryland, B.A. in Music, *summa cum laude*
- 2001, Smithsburg High School

Pertinent Employment History:

- 2005-present, Frederick County Public Schools, General Music Teacher
 - 2005-present, Oakdale Elementary School
 - 2005-2006, North Frederick Elementary School
 - Leadership positions held: School Improvement Team, Team Leader, Education that is Multicultural Representative, Educator Effectiveness Academy, School Teacher Evaluation Team, FCPS Calendar Committee

Previous Political Offices:

- None

Organizations/Community Involvement:

- 2013, Graduate, Inaugural Class, Emerge Maryland
- 2013-present, Board of Directors, Frederick Arts Council
- 2010-present, Board of Directors, Frederick County Teachers Association
- 2007-2012, Secretary, Board of Directors, Frederick Symphony Orchestra
- 2006-2012, Member, Equinox Dance Company
- 2005-present, Member of Violin Section, Frederick Symphony Orchestra

1. What is your vision for the future of Frederick County Public Schools? As a member of the County Council how would you support this vision?

My vision for Frederick County Public Schools is a great public school for every child. That means every school should have the facilities, resources, and excellent staff required to provide quality instructional programs and to meet the needs of our diverse and growing student population, regardless of geographic location within the county.

Excellent public schools drive economic development, job growth, and the quality of life in our community. We know that the number one factor in a child's school success is a positive relationship with the teacher. We must attract the best and brightest educators to Frederick County and keep them here in order to strengthen our schools and provide for our children- which means we must improve our educator salaries to keep us competitive.

As your County Councilwoman from District 4, my primary way to support this vision would be to advocate and vote for a BoE budget that meets the current and growing needs of our school system. Maintenance of Effort has not and will not be enough if we want to see our students and schools achieve all they are capable of. I will work to shift the current education message to one that treats education funding as an investment in our future, not a burden on taxpayers.

2. For the last five years the county government has funded the school system at Maintenance of Effort (MOE) levels even in years the county revenues increased. MOE is the lowest level of county education funding allowed by law and does not take into account inflation, unfunded mandates or other increased costs to education. FCTA has been very clear that MOE funding over this extended period is not adequate to meet the needs of our students. Do you believe MOE funding for Frederick County Public Schools is sufficient or do you think additional funding is necessary? Explain.

MoE funding is absolutely not enough funding for Frederick County Public Schools. We are the eighth richest county in Maryland, but you wouldn't know it by looking at our current investment in students and schools. Our central office staff is stretched so thin they simply can't manage all of the hats they are expected to wear- in fact, we rank dead last in our central office staff-to-student ratio. Critical professional development is delivered via email instead of quality, hands-on sessions. Schools like Hillcrest and Urbana Elementary are severely overcrowded with many students learning in portables. Schools are using outdated hardware and software while technology demands continue to increase. Expert teachers are leaving the county and many new teacher candidates aren't bothering to apply. And desperately needed staff positions such as CASS workers, school psychologists, and media assistants have been cut back or eliminated altogether.

Our children are our most treasured resource; they are the future of this county and deserve the best possible educational experience. It is time to make public education a funding

*priority. That does not mean living outside of our means- but it does mean making sure our public schools don't just survive, but **thrive**.*

3. One of the duties of the County Council is to approve the county budget. In FY14, 47% of county funds were allocated to the Board of Education. How will you determine the appropriate amount of funding for the Board of Education? Do you think the current County Commissioners have adequately funded education? Explain.

The new charter outlines a specific county budget process that has different roles for the County Executive and the County Council. When the County Executive presents a budget to the Council for approval, the Council can take away, but not add, funding to any line item. . My hope is that the two branches will work collaboratively with one another and with the community throughout the budget process to alleviate any potential game-playing with the budget at the point of approval. I will be advocating for public education funding throughout the process.

I plan to work closely with the BoE during joint meetings and hearings in order to listen to and consider the BoE members, Superintendent, and the community's school funding priorities. I will carefully review the proposed BoE budget and ask questions to ensure that I fully understand the needs and funding requests. Our BoE members are elected by the public to work in the best interest of our students, schools, and FCPS staff- their request should be taken seriously each budget cycle. The proposed BoE budget will then have to be balanced against the needs in other areas of the budget, recognizing that a quality education system provides cost savings in other areas such as reduced crime, reduced poverty, less reliance on some county services, and a highly-educated future workforce.

As I mentioned previously, I do not think the current County Commissioners have adequately funded education. Please see above responses.

4. FCTA supports a revenue structure that will provide a predictable, reliable and stable source of sustained funding for education. FCTA opposes tax cuts or limitations that directly or indirectly have an adverse effect on public education. The current County Commissioners have called for tax cuts and rebates while claiming the county faced structural deficits and they imposed flat funding for public education. What is your view of the current local tax structure? What, if any, changes would you advocate?

I believe that a significant portion of taxes must go to public education and other quality of life services. With our current property tax rates and our status as the eighth richest county in Maryland, we absolutely have the funds necessary to provide an appropriate FCPS budget.

The current Board of County Commissioners has made some seriously harmful decisions that are and will continue to affect the amount of property tax dollars available for the county's budget. The decision to mail \$100 property tax rebate checks to homeowners when a "surplus" was discovered not only was a waste of staff time and resources, but contributed to the budget deficit we are now facing.

*In addition, multiple Developer Rights and Responsibility Agreements and Tax Increment Financing agreements have been approved or proposed which have created situations where upwards of 25 years of future property taxes collected from the new homes will be diverted from the general fund (i.e. paying for schools, public safety, road improvements, etc.) and will now go in a special fund to pay for the cost of infrastructure. In the past, impact fees and other stipulations in the developer agreements provided these funds to ensure that needed infrastructure was in place **before** developments could move forward. This is a scary direction for our county to be heading in and we need new leadership to change this future trajectory.*

While it is still unclear how far along some of these agreements will go before our current board is finished their term, I will work with my colleagues to undue as much damage as possible and to work towards a more balanced approach to growth. If the cost of development is more fairly shared between developers, builders, and taxpayers, there will be more tax dollars for a strong education system and other budget areas that impact our quality of life.

5. Recruiting and retaining high-quality employees is essential to improved student achievement. It is made more difficult in Frederick County by our proximity to higher paying school systems and the high cost of owning a home in Frederick. What would you do to help the school system recruit new staff and keep experienced staff in Frederick County?

The number one thing I would do as your County Councilwoman from District 4 is to vote for a budget that includes adequate funding for staff salaries. Education is a people business and without quality professionals teaching our kids, fixing our buildings, driving our buses, and leading our profession, we've got classrooms with shiny smartboards and textbooks and that's about it. We need to ensure that starting salaries and pay for veteran teachers, support staff, and administrators are competitive with other Maryland counties to ensure that we recruit and retain the quality teachers our kids deserve. Secondly, I believe that all county employees deserve to be treated with equal respect. That means if a salary step increase and/or COLA raise is being budgeted for county employees, it should also be budgeted for school employees and vice versa.

6. In spite of an accelerated building schedule, many of our schools remain overcrowded. Enrollment data indicates 13 of the county's 66 public schools exceed full capacity. This

includes; Centerville Elementary, at 140 percent; Hillcrest Elementary, 130 percent; Urbana Middle, 128 percent; Tuscarora Elementary, 120 percent; Yellow Springs Elementary, 112 percent; North Frederick Elementary and Whittier Elementary, 111 percent; Waverley Elementary, 109 percent; Urbana Elementary, 108 percent; Oakdale Middle, 105 percent; Deer Crossing and New Market Elementary, 104 percent; and Monocacy Elementary, 102 percent (source: Frederick News Post, October 7, 2013). What is your plan to provide adequate space for all Frederick's school children? What would you do to alleviate overcrowding in schools, particularly in the city and in the Urbana area? What role does the county's Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance play in mitigating/ preventing overcrowding of schools?

Some of the overcrowding issues can be alleviated by redistricting or moving specialized programs which, while controversial, would help to make a dent in the problem. These decisions, however, are primarily made by the BoE. The new Urbana-area elementary school that is in the design and naming stage will help to alleviate over-crowding in that part of the county. One other possibility is to move the gifted and talented program from Urbana Elementary to Lincoln Elementary which is below capacity, is a brand new building, and has the advantage of being in close proximity to the beautiful ESSL building. In the city, the new North Frederick Elementary building and soon to be constructed Frederick High School should help, but there are still major issues, especially in the Hillcrest and Waverly neighborhoods. An expansion of Hillcrest Elementary and/or a new city school in that area must be part of our Capital Improvement Plan as we move forward. I would work with our Frederick County delegation to the General Assembly for vigorous school construction funding and to move identified projects ahead quickly. It makes little difference to a kid at Hillcrest or Frederick High to learn that a modern facility will be constructed years after they graduate.

The county's APFO was updated by the current BoCC in 2011 and reflects a change in the way school construction is funded. Developers can now opt for a "School Construction Fee" rather than paying the cost of the actual construction/renovation based on future enrollment predictions as was previously required. This represents a significant loss in funds available for school growth that is often necessary when new developments are approved and built. The developers are still required to pay an impact fee which must go towards school construction, however it covers only a fraction of the cost. I would work with my colleagues to remove this new "School Construction Fee" option from the APFO and reinstate a more realistic plan for school construction in future developments around the county.

In addition, the board currently has a task force looking at the viability of replacing the impact fee with a transfer tax. While the impact fee has to go towards school construction, the transfer tax funds can be spent with more flexibility which means less money set aside specifically for schools. This is a fiscally irresponsible way to move forward that does damage to our students and schools and digs further into the pockets of taxpayers. I am against eliminating the developer impact fee.

7. Inequities in technology, space and functionality exist between new and newly renovated buildings versus older buildings. How do you see the need to renovate older schools fitting into the Capital Improvement Plan? How should the renovation needs of older buildings be prioritized?

The first priority in this area should be to make sure that all of our schools offer the same, high-quality facilities. FCPS has recently done a facilities assessment study which outlines the needs of each school and ranks them in a prioritized list. This assessment should be used in conjunction with feedback from school administrators, teachers, support staff, and parents, to determine each school's highest priority needs. Technology disparities are mentioned often, but there are many other inequities among the schools such as auditoriums, music classrooms, science labs, sports fields, HVAC systems, and much more. These improvement items should be worked into the Capital Improvement Program gradually, in priority order.

One challenge to these improvements is that state funding does not cover renovations or replacement of equipment in existing schools. State funding contributes to new school construction and materials (i.e. desks, smartboards, computers, etc.) which only increases the disparity among our schools. The BoE and county government must work together to make renovations of older school buildings a priority in the Capital Improvement Program, even though the burden lies solely on local funding.

We can only address these issues, however, if all of our students first have a safe classroom inside of a school building (not a portable). So while it is not always popular and is not always perceived as fair, new school construction/expansion to alleviate overcrowding sometimes may take priority over renovation. When renovation or replacement is necessary simply to ensure a safe school building (which certainly is the case for North Frederick Elementary), however, it cannot take the back burner to a brand new school.

8. FCTA opposes any public funding of private schools, including but not limited to, vouchers to cover private school tuition. What is your position on vouchers and other forms of public funding for private or home schooling?

I am opposed to any public funding of private schools and home schooling. Our public schools welcome not select groups, but any and every child who lives in Frederick County. Voucher programs that support private schools inherently reduce the amount of funding for public schools, so I would oppose the introduction of any voucher-type program in Frederick County. Families who make private school or home-school choices should understand that Frederick County's priority must be to support a strong public school system at all levels.

9. FCTA and the Frederick Association of School Support Employees (FASSE) oppose the outsourcing and privatization of jobs currently done by the dedicated education support

professionals of FCPS. Do you think it is appropriate for the school system to privatize aspects of their operations? Under what circumstances, if any, would you support privatizing or outsourcing work currently done by FCPS staff?

Privatization of county and school employees is often brought up as a potential cost-saving measure. For businesses that are only about the bottom-line, this could perhaps be an effective change. But for a school system whose business is about people- the people that serve our youngest and most precious citizens- it is not only a financially irresponsible option, but will have a staggering negative impact on the quality of the work these employees do every day. A 2011 study by the Project on Government Oversight found that privatization of government workers is usually more costly. "On average, the service contracts paid private employees 83 percent more than the government would pay a federal employee doing the same job (and that's even taking into account health care benefits, pensions, and so on)." (Washington Post, Wonkblog, September 15, 2011).

I believe our BoE and FCPS staff have looked at privatization of multiple school functions in the past as a cost-comparison measure, but the studies always seem to show that our own staff are just as affordable if not more affordable from a financial standpoint.

Even without the financial argument, we know that when employees are truly invested in their communities and their work, their productivity and effectiveness increases. We have amazing support staff who build relationships with our students and families and ensure that each student gets to school safely, has a warm meal, gives individualized attention when needed, and can learn in a clean, safe environment. I don't think there is any circumstance where we would want to give that up.

10. FCTA supports efforts to protect and enhance the state's collective bargaining laws and opposes "right to work" laws which restrict freedom of association and weaken organized labor in Maryland. Do you support public education employees' right to bargain collectively? Currently, county employees do not have collective bargaining rights. Do you support county employees' right to bargain collectively?

I support public education employees' right to bargain collectively (and not only because I am one!). The countries with the best public school systems, such as Finland and Singapore, all have teachers unions that lead the profession and ensure the best working conditions for educators and students. Negotiating time for planning, collaboration, and fair pay mean an improvement in instruction and thus an improvement in student achievement. A recent study by a Harvard Business School professor found that "making progress in meaningful work," was the number one motivator for employees and that happier people will work harder. (New York Times, September 3, 2011). What better way to make sure that our educators can make progress and find their work meaningful than if they are at the table, collaboratively making decisions about the context of their work?

I also support county employees' right to bargain collectively. While my single voice as a future County Councilwoman can't make this happen, I would be fully on board to discussing this option with county employees, labor groups, and fellow officials.

11. As a member of the County Council, how will you work with the elected Board of Education, particularly regarding issues related to funding the BOE capital and operating budgets?

I would like to see the continuation of a liaison from the County Council to the BoE. In addition, I believe joint BoE/County government meetings should continue and I would work to include the Frederick City government on several occasions throughout the year to be sure that the needs of our city schools are addressed. All groups should be open about their priorities and discuss potential cost-sharing methods, such as fields, recreation spaces, performance spaces, etc. throughout the process. If at any time I have questions about a budget line item or priority, I would go directly to the BoE or FCPS staff to ensure I am informed on the entire budget I would be voting on. All of us are serving for the same reasons- to make Frederick County the best it can possibly be for all of its citizens- and we should be working with each other, not against each other.

12. As a member of the County Council, how will you work with FCTA, FASSE and the Frederick County Administrators and Supervisors Association (FCASA) so that the experience, knowledge and expertise of professional educators will help inform your decisions on issues related to public education?

As an educator myself, I know how important it is to include the experience and knowledge of those currently working in the schools when making decisions that affect public education. FCTA, FASSE, and FCASA represent the vast majority of our school employees and are truly the experts on education issues. When employees have buy-in to the decision-making process, changes and transitions almost always happen more smoothly. I will be open to meeting with FCTA, FASSE, and FCASA leadership and members whenever I am voting on education funding and/or other issues that affect our students, schools, and staff.