

2021 CANDIDATE QUESTIONNAIRE
City of Tuscaloosa
Office: Tuscaloosa City Board of Education, District 1

Candidate:

Karen Thompson-Jackson

1. What do you see as the top three issues facing the Tuscaloosa City School System? How should those issues be addressed?

- (1) Ongoing effects of COVID-19 on students, teachers, and families
- (2) Lack of academic and social engagement opportunities for the average student
- (3) Teacher retention

A comprehensive action plan will address student achievement, mental and social health, and learning loss. After auditing available resources, an intentional plan must be implemented for equitable distribution of services. To address the lack of engagement opportunities for average students, we must look beyond our traditional educational models. The University of Alabama and Stillman College are great resources for mutually beneficial partnerships for innovation and creativity in education. After school programs must be a priority and barriers to these programs must be addressed with a focus on transportation. Additionally, we will address teacher retention while emphasizing the recruitment of experienced educators. To become more competitive as a district, we must address teacher compensation and professional development.

2. Significant community effort has been dedicated to develop and implement a comprehensive strategic plan for the Tuscaloosa City School System. Do you support the implementation of this plan? If your answer is “yes,” why is it important to do so? If your answer is “no,” how would you change the plan?

I support the strategic plan. The community lifted their voices to address strengths and weaknesses in our system when the plan was developed. However, we understand that all plans should be fluid and flexible as they are designed to evolve and adapt as needs change. For instance, this pandemic has presented us with an opportunity to pivot the plan. We must use data and guidance from the State Department of Education to ensure that our plan continues to serve all students in our system. Data-driven action that is innovative, creative as well as flexible is paramount to the success of the strategic plan. We must revisit and revise the plan as needed with special attention to the needs of individual schools, accountability, communication, and transparency.

3. What should be done to address schools labeled as “failing” by the Alabama Department of Education?

We should first ask ourselves questions: Did we appropriately identify and meet faculty/staff needs? Did we offer additional learning opportunities and supports for students? Did we encourage and inform families of methods to support their learners outside of school? Once we assess the shortcomings, we must internally take steps to ensure schools that serve our underserved students get the assistance that is needed. We should provide data-driven and researched interventions for leaders, teachers, and

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families who are a part of “failing” schools. Plans should be individualized for each school; furthermore, they should be supported by all stakeholders, including teachers. Corrective plans should be presented publicly so the system may be held accountable for improving the state of our schools that we are failing to provide the most effective support.

4. What efforts would you like to see to close the education “slide” students have seen from COVID-19 disruptions?

COVID-19 has impacted the educational, emotional, and social developmental aspects of every member of our community. For students, namely, learning loss, anxiety and fear, and lack of access to the resources needed to be successful. A comprehensive plan must holistically address students’ lives and learning—including, but not limited to, remediation as well as extracurricular activities and social development programs. Teachers need professional development in all areas. More teachers must be hired to reduce class sizes in all grades, but especially in elementary and middle schools. Additional financial resources to fund social workers in every school will be essential in providing wrap-around services that will address emotional and developmental needs. The plan will include summer programs for all students and after school programming that is free. In addition, the plan must be appropriately resourced to ensure educational success for all students.

5. The Tuscaloosa region is expected to have a shortage of skilled labor in future years. What is the role of the Tuscaloosa City School System in helping address that shortage?

Our role as a system is to understand policies and procedures that relate to educating all students in the system. We are preparing and educating all children to become productive citizens for our community and beyond. It is important to understand that some students will enter the workforce, attend higher education, join the armed services, or choose other paths. To address the expected shortage, we need to encourage students’ interest in these fields. We must expand work programs for students who plan to immediately enter the workforce after graduation. Summer work programs should be broadened in partnership with industries during the summer to learn new skills while working in the areas with the most shortages. We need to ensure that TCTA has the resources to widen the opportunities for classes, job exposures, and skills labs. Our job as a system is to prepare students with a foundational education for success.

6. What is your vision for the Tuscaloosa City School System in 10 years? How will you, in your role as an elected official, help make that vision a reality?

In ten years, school systems around this state will look at Tuscaloosa as the standard of excellence. I believe with hard work and additional resources, all of our schools will succeed. Specifically, I envision District One excelling in Math and Reading, as they provide the most opportunity for growth. I envision a system with highly qualified teachers resulting from competitive salaries, engaging professional development, increased teacher leadership opportunities, and because TCS is a great place to work. Our system has the potential to transform the lives of all students and their families. I will advocate for the

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resources necessary to make this vision a reality. I will ask difficult questions and will not accept that we cannot excel or be competitive. TCS matters. I will fight for this because this is my home and the community is my family. We must all lift, inspire and educate our youth.