

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

1. Describe briefly your qualifications for holding the office of Memphis School board member. (Please answer in the space below, but you may also attach a resume or other description to provide us with additional detail.)

My education and experience have extensively prepared me to be a member of the Memphis City Schools Board of Education. I have a B.S. in Education, an M.B.A., and a J.D degree. In addition to my four years of service as a school board member, I have experience in management, I taught middle and high school for five years, I served four years as a lawyer, and I currently run a non-profit organization. Therefore, I have direct experience as a school board member and a varied background that has prepared me to understand the educational, operational, and legal issues facing the Memphis City Schools.

In my four years of service on the school board, I have received training in many areas, including effective school board governance, advocacy, setting a vision for the district, board-superintendent relationship building, community engagement, budget planning, policy development, school law and board leadership. Additionally, I am a member of and have attended conferences for several school board associations including the Tennessee Schools Board Association, the National Schools Board Association, the Council of the Great City Schools, and the Council of Urban Boards of Education.

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

2. In your opinion, what are the three greatest issues (challenges or opportunities) facing the Memphis City School System in the next four years; and what policy changes, if any, would you recommend in dealing with these issues?

Three of the greatest issues facing the Memphis City Schools in the next four years are: 1) **academic achievement** – the state of Tennessee will increase significantly its standards under the No Child Left Behind Act; 2) **funding** – the question of who is responsible for funding the MCS may not be answered in the near future; and 3) **accountability** – the MCS has to implement more effective practices and methods of evaluation that will result in greater accountability across all areas of the system (academics, business operations, safety, etc.).

Academic Achievement

To prepare for the increase in academic standards, the system has to make sure its policies and academic plan are updated so that they adequately prepare our students under the new standards. Further, the school board needs to approve and embrace the reform agenda proposed by Superintendent Cash, and to ensure it holds the administration accountable for results.

Under the reform agenda the administration will, among other initiatives, continue providing increased and intense support to our most challenged schools, support additional effective early education programs, place an emphasis on literacy across all subject areas, implement rigorous academic standards and courses in all schools, and expand our current optional program to offer additional diploma options across the district, which will lead to more students remaining in and graduating from high school.

Funding

To address the funding situation, the school system should actively participate in the summit on public education funding in this community being organized by the Shelby County Board of Commissioners Chairman Deidre Malone. Additionally, the MCS has to embark on a campaign wherein it educates its parents, staff, students and community about public education funding in Tennessee and work with all stakeholders in reaching a solution that will result in a funding system that is in the best interest of all students in the Memphis/Shelby County community. Furthermore, the MCS should begin to identify new sources of revenue so that it can ensure it is able to fund its reform agenda discussed above.

Accountability

The MCS' current policies provide adequate accountability measures to guide the district's practices. Divided into six sections, the MCS policies cover board operations, fiscal management, support services, instructional services, human resources, and students. Each section contains a number of policies that should guide the district's practices and, when followed, should result in a highly accountable system.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

The challenge facing the school board is making sure we establish effective methods for holding the administration accountable for the proper implementation of the policies. The board and superintendent are currently participating in the Reform Governance in Action (RGA) program, which is a two-year program to help strengthen the governance/management team of public school systems. The RGA is equipping us with the tools necessary to make sure we have an effective accountability system and thus will be able to recognize whether the system is following its established policies, practices and procedures. Additionally, the RGA helps us to understand what policies we should have and to analyze whether our current policies are adequate and effective. Throughout and upon completion of this program, the school board and superintendent undoubtedly will implement a system of accountability that will lead to real results in all areas for the MCS.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

3. Was a Board member, what policies would you support to address the issues of school safety and violence prevention?

The Memphis City Schools has several policies that address the issues of school safety and violence prevention. Policies 6.313 (Student Behavior), 6.3103 (Gang Prevention, Intervention and Enforcement), 6.391 (Alternative Schools), 6.3091 (Unsafe School Choice), 6.309 (State-Mandated Zero Tolerance Offenses), and the Student Code of Conduct combined provide the prevention, intervention and enforcement policies and tools to address school safety and violence. A review of its current policies will reveal that the MCS' problem is not that it lacks effective policies; the problem is the MCS' implementation of the policies.

The MCS has to ensure that its principals, teachers and staff fully understand its policies and know how to enforce them. The system also has to make sure its students and parents are aware of the policies and understand how the policies will be enforced. Finally, the school board has to ensure it implements the appropriate methods of evaluation for holding the administration accountable for results in this area.

I am encouraged that the district has implemented new initiatives this school year, including the smart card ID tracking system and additional security personnel concentrating on the high-incident schools. Further, the administration has identified our large number of students who are overage for their grades as a catalyst for many of the incidents in our schools. As a result, the administration is identifying ways to address this problem, including possibly dedicating one school as an institution for all overage students so that the system can concentrate its efforts at getting these students back on track. Additionally, the MCS is looking to expand its alternative school offerings as we have learned that many students who constantly misbehave in the regular school setting find success in an alternative school.

The school board has to ensure it holds the administration accountable for providing periodical and regular reports on the data related to safety and violence in our schools. Also, the school board has to make sure the district secures the funds needed to support the initiatives aimed at decreasing the incidents of violence and classroom disruptions.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

4. Define the role of the School Board in leading the Memphis City School System, and what is that role in relationship to the role of the Superintendent?

The School Board leads the Memphis City Schools through governance and has three main roles: 1) hire the superintendent, 2) approve and adopt policy, and 3) approve the annual budget. The superintendent is responsible for the administration of the district, including implementation of the policies adopted by the board. Together, the board and superintendent form the governance/management team. This team is responsible for the performance of the district, with the school board being the body accountable for results to the system's stakeholders. To be accountable to all stakeholders, the board is responsible for holding the superintendent accountable for the effective management of the district across all areas. Thus, the board has to ensure it has appropriate methods for evaluating the superintendent and that it regularly communicates the results to its stakeholders.

As previously mentioned, the board and superintendent are participating in the Reform Governance in Action (RGA) program. This two-year program will equip the governance/management team with the tools necessary to be a high-performing team, and will equip us with the tools necessary to implement effective policies, practices and procedures that will result in improved board relations and operations, an improved board-superintendent relationship, and stronger governance and management oversight methods that will result in improved academic achievement for all students.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

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5. Are there opportunities that could be pursued for collaboration between the Memphis City School System and the Shelby County School System? If so, what are they?

The Memphis City Schools and Shelby County Schools currently collaborate in some areas. The systems are in the final year of a three-year agreement covering the allocation of \$180 million in capital funds from Shelby County and the joint funding of the construction of a new high school located in an annex-reserve area of the county. Additionally, the systems jointly funded a study on the affects of Shelby County Schools transitioning into a special school district. Further, the administrations of the systems meet regularly to discuss school funding and to develop joint legislative agenda items along with the other large districts in the state. Finally, both systems are members of the Shelby County Needs Assessment Committee and thus meet regularly regarding the systems' capital needs.

Both systems are large enough to purchase its supplies by the truckloads, thus, there are no savings to be realized by combining purchases. However, the systems should explore other areas wherein partnering may help them to realize savings and/or improve efficiency, such as staff development, human resources operations, transportation, fleet management, etc.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

6. An educated workforce is one of the key factors that companies consider when evaluating a city for a new operation. What measures should the Memphis City Schools address in order to prepare its high school graduates for the workforce and/or college?

The MCS should work closely with the Memphis Regional Chamber of Commerce, industry leaders, the Tennessee Department of Education, and higher education leaders to make sure its curriculum adequately prepares its students for 21st century careers and post secondary education. Additionally, the MCS should utilize a method for assessing the workplace skills of its students to assist it in determining the needs and optimal careers for its students (i.e., WorkKeys[®] Assessment).

As an example, we are aware that Memphis' bioscience industry is growing and will need a trained workforce to be successful. The Memphis City Schools should be in the process of expanding its course and diploma offerings so that it is either preparing its students to enter those fields straight out of high school or to enter post-secondary education that will further prepare the students for those up and coming careers in the biomedical field. We need to make sure we partner with the industry leaders (Chamber, companies, Bioworks Foundation, Memphis Fast Forward initiative, etc) as we develop new programs for our students. Additionally, we need to form advisory boards that will meet regularly to evaluate our programs, provide learning experiences for our students and assist us in updating our curriculum so that we are always aligned with industry standards. These partnerships will benefit the industry, the MCS students and thus the entire community.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

7. Merit pay for teachers is a major topic of discussion nationally. What are your views on differentiating pay for teachers?

I support merit pay for teachers. We have many teachers who go above and beyond their requirements to make sure our students receive the best education possible. These teachers should be awarded for their efforts. Additionally, a properly implemented differential pay system could serve as a source of encouragement for more teachers to go that extra mile for our students.

I feel strongly that prior to implementing any system of merit pay, the Memphis City Schools administration would have to make sure it gets the support of the Memphis Education Association. Any merit pay system would have to be fair, consistently applied, unambiguous, and designed to reach a desired and well communicated result. Additionally, the MCS would have to make sure all affected parties are represented in all phases of the planning process.

Some school systems have successfully implemented merit pay systems. The most successful ones secured the needed support and buy-in. The Memphis City Schools system can follow the best practices and likewise result in a merit pay system in which all involved can win.

MEMPHIS SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

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8. What initiatives do you propose to establish positive, cooperative communication with the funding bodies regarding school funding?

I am encouraged with the Shelby County Board of Commissioners Chairman Deidre Malone's call for a summit, which will include all stakeholders, to discuss the future of public education funding in the Memphis/Shelby County community. The Memphis City Schools Board of Education needs to make sure it is actively involved in the summit and that it puts the issues directly affecting the system on the table.

In addition to participating in the Shelby County Board of Commissioners' summit, the MCS board and administration needs to make sure it improves and develops positive and cooperative relationships with its funding bodies, including the Shelby County Commissioners, Memphis City Council, state legislators, Tennessee Department of Education, and the federal government. To do so, we need to make sure our funding bodies understand the challenges and opportunities facing the system. The MCS has to communicate regularly with its funding sources regarding its results, initiatives, plans, goals, successes and challenges. It has to make sure it helps its funders understand the roles and responsibilities of the MCS board and administration and that it is appropriately accountable to the funding bodies.

Earlier this year, I proposed that the school board and City Council Education committee work together to set an annual calendar and agenda to discuss the issues affecting the education of the children of Memphis. It would be a good idea for the school board to invite members of the City Council, the County Commission, the General Assembly, the Department of Education and members of Congress to quarterly presentations about the MCS' initiatives in an effort of keeping those bodies informed and to build effective working relationships.

NAME: TOMEKA R. HART

9. Optional schools have the very positive reputation for high quality education. How do we ensure the same educational standard for all students?

While I fully support our optional schools program, I have challenged the administration to expand our offering of academically rigorous courses/curriculum to all schools in the district, giving all students an opportunity to be challenged and exposed to high level courses. I am thrilled that we now have at least two Advanced Placement (AP) courses in every high school, and feel that we need to continue in that effort and offer even more at each school. Further, I am optimistic by the fact that Superintendent Cash feels strongly that the optional program should be expanded. He recognizes we need to address the inequity issue unintentionally created when the district only selected certain schools for high quality education programs.

To ensure the same educational standards for all students we need to make sure we place academically rigorous courses in all schools. We need to ensure we have teachers in all schools that are qualified and prepared to teach the advanced courses. Every student who qualifies should have the opportunity to take honors level and AP courses.

By expanding our high quality education programs to all schools in the district, we could improve the academic achievement of all schools, which would result in a positive reputation for high quality education for the Memphis City Schools district as a whole.