

# Coalition for a Better Memphis Candidate Questionnaire Shelby County School Board

The Coalition for a Better Memphis is an independent non-profit organization, made up of Shelby County individuals, businesses and organizations. Its mission is to assist area voters in identifying qualified candidates for public office.

In 2008, CBM's Candidate Assessment Committee is interviewing candidates for the Shelby County School Board with the intention of publishing a "voter guide" of candidate evaluations.

Completed questionnaires may be emailed to: [peggy@bettermemphis.org](mailto:peggy@bettermemphis.org)  
Or Mailed to:

**Coalition for a Better Memphis  
7730 Goshawk Cove  
Cordova, TN 38016**

Direct any questions to:  
Peggy Callahan  
[peggy@bettermemphis.org](mailto:peggy@bettermemphis.org)

Please complete this questionnaire and  
return it to

The Coalition for a Better Memphis

**No later than 5 p.m.,**  
**Friday, June 6, 2008**

*Please answer all questions carefully – your responses will be printed on the  
CBM website EXACTLY as they are provided to us.*

SHELBY COUNTY SCHOOL BOARD QUESTIONNAIRE 2008

NAME: DIANE GEORGE

1. In your opinion, what are the three greatest issues (problems or opportunities) facing the Shelby County School system in the next four years?
  1. Funding the capital improvements/construction demands – As long as requests for approval of new residential construction are approved in the area of the county served by Shelby County Schools, the demand exists for new school construction. For many years the enrollment in Shelby County Schools has increased by approximately 1,000 per year. That is the equivalent of one new school. With limited funding, the school system has purchased portable classrooms, with the result being as many as 19 portables on a single campus. This is certainly no permanent solution to the problem and not an option we feel our students and teachers deserve. With the present funding formula being approximately \$3 to Memphis City Schools for every \$1 allocated to Shelby County Schools, the money approved for new SCS school construction has resulted in ballooning, unmanageable debt for the county. While some measures have been put into place to more carefully assess need and award funds more judiciously, the problem remains. The creation of a special school district for Shelby County Schools is one possible solution. The urgency of finding a workable solution for all stakeholders cannot be ignored any longer.
  2. Funding the operating budget – Shelby County Schools historically has provided excellent public education at a significantly lower than average per pupil expenditure. It has done an amazing job of effectively and efficiently utilizing its resources and those of its parents to ensure students have what they need to receive the level of education required to compete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global marketplace. Each year the school system faces the painful decision-making process of looking at prospective cuts to programs and services to make ends meet in light of the increased costs of opening new schools, employee benefits, new textbook adoption, transportation, and many other budget items. State and local funding bodies must be helped to understand the impact of operating on insufficient funds.
  3. Meeting the increased needs of students – Shelby County Schools' student population is changing and requiring more resources to effectively meet their educational needs. These needs range from specialized assistance for the increasing enrollment of English as a Second Language (ESL) students (now over 5%), to greater numbers of Special Education students (approximately 20%, including gifted) and the greater instructional demands of high achieving students who must be prepared to be competitive in applications to the highest quality universities. Shelby County Schools cannot rest on its past laurels. To ensure that all children are provided the education they need, we must continually train our teachers in the most recent, research-based teaching and learning strategies and introduce students to the technology and materials that will enhance quality of student learning.
2. Describe briefly your qualifications for holding the office of Shelby County School Board member.

I'm a native Memphian, present resident of Collierville, and a strong advocate for public education and Shelby County Schools (SCS). As a Realtor serving the Memphis Area, I've witnessed the exponential growth of the suburban municipalities

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and recognize the financial and management challenges of continually building new schools to remedy overcrowding. I realize the importance of quality public education to our community's health and future.

I've exhibited leadership skills both in my career and community services. Regarding state-level positions, I have served as a Director for the Tennessee Association of Realtors since 2001 and presently serve as Vice-Chair of the Convention Committee. I have been past Chairperson of the State of Tennessee Residential Contract Forms Committee. A member of the Memphis Association of Realtors since 1986 and a Board Director from 2000-2002, I have served on its Governmental Affairs Committee since 2003. This position has provided me much knowledge about education funding and other legislation at the state and local levels.

I have an excellent parental perspective on the quality of education provided by SCS, having two daughters who graduated from Collierville High School. I've devoted much personal time to the support of Shelby County Schools through service as a Director of the Shelby County Schools Education Foundation since 2003. As Chairperson, I coordinated the Annual Shelby County Schools Alumni Hall of Fame Gala in 2007, an event drawing 500 advocates of the school district to honor outstanding alumni of the school system and raising over \$70,000. Proceeds from the annual event help maintain and expand the operation of the District's Teacher Resource Center. I also regularly attend SCS Board of Education meetings to keep abreast of current issues and needs of the school district.

3. What do you think is the primary role of the School Board in leading the Shelby County School System, and what is the primary role of the superintendent?

There are two primary roles of the School Board. The first is setting policy. Board members must develop new policy as appropriate and ensure that existing policies are amended to reflect changing district needs. Each board member must commit the time and effort to continually update his/her knowledge of district, school, student and staff issues in order to make sound policy decisions. Effective and regular communication must be maintained with constituents as well as school and district staff so as to fully understand all perspectives and facts before determining policy.

The second primary role is approving the district's budget and expenditures. Board members must ask important questions of staff and other experts in obtaining adequate information to make budgetary decisions. They must take seriously the responsibility for reading and comprehending all relevant information provided them by the superintendent and others prior to board meetings.

Wisdom in making policy and budget decisions is key to maintaining alignment with the district's strategic plan to meet identified goals. Performing these two primary roles well serves to provide guidance to the superintendent and his staff, who operate the school system on a daily basis. The superintendent's role is to ensure high quality management and operation of the school system through oversight of his staff. He must be knowledgeable regarding the financial, administrative, instructional and support services required to maintain efficient, cost-effective operation of the district in order to produce high student performance.

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4. School construction costs have been a major contributor to the county government's debt load. What, if anything, should the Shelby County School Board do in the years ahead to help the county avoid adding to the debt?

The SCS School Board should continue to advocate for the elimination of the ADA funding formula in favor of the creation of a special school district for SCS. This legislation opens up the opportunity for school construction decisions to be made totally on a needs assessment basis. School board members should also continue to advocate for adequate and equitable funding of public education through greater state revenue sources. Every effort should be made to creatively, yet with the safety of children and staff in mind, utilize present space to accommodate increasing enrollment. Utilization of a grocery store for classrooms is one example already implemented.

5. Raising student achievement is a critical mission for the school system. If you could implement only one initiative, enhancement or management change, to raise student achievement in the Shelby County schools in the next four years, what would it be?

If I could implement only one initiative, it would be to invest in our teachers by providing additional high-quality professional development. Teachers would be provided incentives to take additional coursework at a university to enhance knowledge of their subject area, and to attend more training sessions to better integrate technology into the curriculum and to improve their individualization of instruction. Incentives could range from reimbursement for graduate course tuition to actual pay incentives. To adequately educate our children to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century expectations, our teachers must be encouraged to regularly update their knowledge.

6. Are there opportunities for collaboration between the Shelby County School System and the Memphis School System that aren't being pursued today? If so, what are two that you would favor?

The first opportunity that is possibly not being pursued to the fullest degree is the sharing of knowledge. Even though SCS is significantly smaller than MCS, both are considered to be large school districts on a national scale. Each has developed strategies in business, instructional and support areas that could be shared more effectively. For example, SCS has developed a bus transportation system that has received national awards for its high quality. MCS is exploring alternatives to its current transportation system and might study some of the factors critical to operating its own fleet. Similarly, MCS has developed an excellent pre-K program and is conducting a comprehensive evaluation of its impact. SCS staff could observe MCS pre-K classrooms to help guide curriculum selection for its pre-K program and learn from the results of the evaluation.

A second opportunity is greater board and superintendent collaboration in identifying common needs and presenting a united approach in encouraging state legislators to pass legislation that helps large school systems with issues including school renovation,

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new construction, and teacher recruitment. By improving the number and quality of joint efforts, a much louder voice can be heard in Nashville. Better and more frequent communication among board members from each district is essential for enhancing the operation of both districts.

7. How would you propose the Shelby County School system cooperate and comply with the current court order to achieve unitary status?

The Court required that Shelby County Schools “work toward racial balance in all its schools. The Court went on to explain that a *flexible* goal of that effort, and a starting point in analyzing Defendant’s success in desegregation, shall be a racial composition of both faculty and students in each school that is reflective of the overall student population, with a margin of error of fifteen (15) percentage points.” I would propose that the school district begin by making changes in staffing and student assignments to the maximum extent possible while preserving the concept of neighborhood schools. One challenge will be to achieve approximately 36% minority teaching staff. Greater efforts should be made to recruit minority teachers, since approximately 200-300 new teachers are hired each year. A more difficult challenge is to assign students by minority status to achieve approximately 36% minority enrollment at each school. Currently, a large percentage of minorities reside in localized areas of the county. To bus them across the county to a school needing additional minority students or to bus white students across the county to schools that need more white students will cause many students to lose the opportunity to go to a neighborhood school in exchange for spending significant time on a bus. State law prohibits a child from riding a bus more than 45 minutes one way. Any assignment changes would need to keep this law in mind. I would propose that the school district make school boundary changes that encourage a more diverse enrollment at schools. Because of the high cost and restrictiveness (ex. inability to engage in after-school activities) of transportation and parental issues of not being easily accessible to their children, I am reluctant to support large-scale busing. We witnessed the failure of large-scale busing in Memphis City Schools in the 60’s and 70’s. I believe that with the increasing numbers of minority students who are entering SCS schools, this less severe strategy can be implemented to gradually achieve the unitary goal over the next few years.

8. What is your position on Special School District status?

I support Senator Mark Norris’ bill because it would create a special school district for Shelby County Schools. Memphis City Schools is already a special school district. This bill effectively removes provisions for the ADA-funding formula, makes school district boundaries permanent, and funds each school district on the basis of tax revenues collected. It is important to have an independent assessment of the plan to ensure that Memphis City Schools will continue to have the level of revenue it needs as a result. The specific details of the plan need to be worked out so that the solution is agreeable to both districts. Both districts would benefit from permanent boundary lines and the elimination of continuous new school construction that results from new annexations by the City of Memphis.

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9. As a public servant, how do you propose to be accessible to the people you represent?

I would establish leadership captains for neighborhoods, within each school boundary zone. They would meet monthly with representatives from the PTA and school staff. The captain would communicate the results of each meeting to me. I would be accessible to attend the meetings as requested. Meeting topics for discussion would include the current issues and concerns within the school community as well as district-wide matters. In order for me to represent others, I need to have good communication with them to understand and convey their interests and needs. Because of the important role of good communication, it is essential to understand all aspects and perspectives regarding the issue.

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