



The Research Bureau

Questions for the 2019 Candidates for City Council and School Committee in Worcester

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Research in the Public Interest

**Questions for the 2019 Candidates
for City Council and School Committee in Worcester**

This publication is intended to provide candidates and residents in Worcester, Massachusetts with questions for consideration on key topics impacting the community and government. Elections represent critical periods for a society to set agendas and initiate new approaches to resolve community concerns. We offer the following to provoke discussion, debate, and potentially decision as the voters of Worcester select their leaders for the 2020-2022 political cycle.

City of Worcester 2019 Municipal Election

The 2019 Municipal Election is scheduled for Tuesday, November 5, from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Worcester City Council—At Large (13 Candidates for 6 Positions)

- Morris A. Bergman
- Bill Coleman
- Donna M. Colorio
- Evan Corrigan
- Tony J. Economou
- Jesse G. Gibson
- Etel Haxhijaj
- Khrystian E. King
- Joseph M. Petty
- Gary Rosen
- Owurakwaku Poku Sarkodieh
- Ralph A. Tiscione, Jr.
- Kate Toomey

Worcester School Committee (12 Candidates for 6 Positions)

- Cara Lisa Berg-Powers
- Chantel Bethea
- Dianna L. Biancheria
- Laura Clancy
- Jack L. Foley
- Jermoh V. Kamara
- Mariah Lizmari Martinez
- Molly O. McCullough
- John F. Monfredo
- Brian A. O’Connell
- Tracy O’Connell Novick
- John A. Trobaugh

District 1 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- Sean M. Rose

District 2 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- Candy F. Mero-Carlson

District 3 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- George J. Russell

District 4 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- Sarai Rivera

District 5 Councilor (2 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Johnhaynes Beckles Honeycutt, Sr.
- Matthew E. Wally

Wednesday, October 16, 2019—Last day to register to vote in the 2019 municipal election.

*Questions for the 2019 Candidates
for City Council and School Committee
in Worcester*

The City of Worcester operates under a Council-Manager form of government with a popularly elected Mayor, known as a modified Plan E form of government. The Worcester Public Schools (WPS) system is a quasi-independent department of the City.

The City Council is the City's legislative body while the City Manager serves as chief executive officer. The City Council is made up of 11 members—six elected citywide (or at-large) and five elected from districts. The Mayor is the candidate who receives the most votes in the mayoral election and wins an at-large City Council seat. All at-large candidates are automatically entered into the mayoral race, and have the option of withdrawing their name from consideration for Mayor. In addition to his or her role as City Councilor, the Mayor serves as the ceremonial head of the government and chairs both the City Council and School Committee. The City Council hires the City Manager and can remove him or her by majority vote. The City Manager hires all City employees (except the City Clerk, City Auditor, and WPS employees), oversees City operations, and presents the City Council with an annual budget that must be approved by June 30 of each year. The City Council has the authority to reduce the City Manager's proposed budget, but not increase it. The approved budget must be balanced.

The Worcester School Committee is the WPS's legislative body while the Superintendent of Schools serves as chief executive officer. The School Committee consists of the Mayor and six elected at-large members. The School Committee sets districtwide school policies, votes on the district budget, and hires and removes WPS personnel.

City Council and School Committee elections are held in odd-numbered years.

Questions for Mayoral Candidates

As chair of the City Council and the School Committee, Mayoral candidates should consider all of the questions outlined in this report, whether focused on the needs of the City or the Worcester Public Schools. There are some questions, however, that are pertinent directly to candidates for Mayor and the opportunities offered by that office.

What is the role of the Mayor?

Under the Worcester City Charter, the Mayor is the official head of the City for ceremonial purposes and chair of the City Council and School Committee. As such, the Mayor has no executive powers, but has the opportunity to highlight issues impacting the city and schools and form coalitions to address municipal challenges.

What do you believe is the appropriate role of the Mayor as the highest elected office in the City of Worcester?

What will your priorities be as Mayor?

While the Mayor does not set independent policy for the city, he or she is able to highlight issues and build coalitions to move solutions forward.

What priorities will you have for the 2020-2022 term and how will you seek to accomplish them?

How would you work to improve coordination between the City Council and School Committee?

The Mayor is the only official to sit on both the City Council and School Committee, serving as chair of each. In this unique position, the Mayor links the municipal priorities of the City Council with the educational priorities of the School Committee. While the School Committee oversees how the WPS allocates resources, the City Council determines how extensive, or how limited, those resources might be from both an operating and capital perspective.

How will you facilitate coordination between the City Council and the School Committee and balance municipal and educational concerns?

What are your plans for committee appointments?

A significant amount of City Council business occurs in Standing Committees, comprised of three Councilors appointed by the Mayor. The committees are Economic Development, Education, Municipal Operations, Public Health & Human Services, Public Safety, Public Service & Transportation, Public Works, Rules and Legislative Affairs, Traffic & Parking, Veterans' & Military Affairs, and Youth, Parks & Recreation. Committee chairs, appointed by the Mayor, set meeting schedules and agendas and therefore wield considerable influence over the timing and approval of key items.

The School Committee has four Standing Committees: School & Student Performance, Finance & Operations, Governance & Employee Issues, and Teaching, Learning & Student Supports.

How would you approach the appointment of committees and chairs? How would you make the committee structure responsive and effective in addressing important issues?

Questions for City Council Candidates

What are your top priorities for Worcester? What will be your first item of business?

Residents expect municipal government to address a significant number of issues. The City stretches limited resources to maintain operations in a variety of areas.

What are your priorities for the City and how will you seek to implement them? Only one item can be the first order of business—what will be your first initiative as a City Councilor?

What metrics will you use to measure the performance of the City Manager and administration?

One of the most important jobs of the City Council is overseeing the performance of the City Manager and thus the entire City administration. Yet the City Council does not set formal annual goals or objectives for the City Manager. As a result, there is little opportunity for the City Manager to proactively improve his or her evaluation based on measurable outcomes.

What measures will you use to determine whether the City Manager is performing adequately and carrying out the policies and priorities of the City Council? Do you think performance evaluations can be used to improve public outcomes?

In which Standing Committees would you like to serve?

While the Mayor is responsible for appointing three councilors to each of the 11 Standing Committees, he or she may take individual councilors' qualifications and preferences into account when assigning seats. Committee members have the ability to drive the conversation in a variety of subject areas, and can more easily prioritize their chosen causes. All councilors chair at least one committee, and sit on at least three.

On which Standing Committees would you like to serve? What makes you qualified in those areas, and what policies would you emphasize?

What is the appropriate level of taxation?

The City requires tax revenue to pay for services for its residents. The extent of those taxes is hotly debated. Many of the problems with city infrastructure or services could be mitigated with more money, among other solutions, but overburdening residents with higher taxes could lead to a lower quality of life or even displacement.

Over the years, the City of Worcester has not raised taxes to the amount allowed under Proposition 2 1/2 and Massachusetts General Laws. As a result, the City Council has the ability to increase taxes to raise approximately \$10 million in additional annual revenue without seeking a voter override. Should the City access this untapped tax levy capacity by raising taxes and, if so, how should it spend the new revenues?

The City could also choose not to raise taxes on residents, or even reduce the tax levy. How big of a cut would be needed to satisfy the real or perceived needs of taxpayers, and which areas of the budget could be targeted to ensure that the budget remains balanced?

Should Worcester seek a single tax rate?

Each fall, the City Council sets tax rates for the fiscal year. Worcester taxes commercial and industrial properties at a higher rate than residential properties, creating conflict between residents and businesses as each tries to prove they would be overburdened by proposed tax rates. Worcester's current residential tax rate is \$18 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation while its commercial/industrial tax rate is \$34.90 per \$1,000. The Massachusetts median residential rate is \$15.36 per \$1,000 while the median commercial/industrial rate is \$17.45 per \$1,000. The Research Bureau has released multiple reports suggesting the possibility of using data such as business costs and revenues, household costs and incomes, and property values from both categories to evaluate tax sensitivity in a given budget year, and offered a variety of options the City could consider to return to a single tax rate.

How will you approach the annual tax rate decision? Would you support using such data to evaluate tax sensitivity? Would you work to achieve a single tax rate?

What are your plans for involvement in the Worcester Red Sox stadium project?

With Polar Park, the new home of the Boston Red Sox AAA affiliate, opening in 2021, the new City Council will be in office during the construction of an impactful addition to the City of Worcester. The City Council voted 9-1 for \$100 million in loan orders to facilitate the city-owned structure, which City officials say will be worth the investment, both in associated private development that will be added to stadium revenue to pay off the debt, and in the spinoff effect it will have on the rest of the area. But the consensus among economists is that such stadium transactions carry unique risks and often do not pay for themselves. Such concerns have been echoed by some residents, who are also concerned about neighborhood impact, possible gentrification, and whether the construction process will include promises to benefit the community. Other changes being made to facilitate the project, including the redesign of Kelley Square and the use of eminent domain to clear way for construction, could be affected by City Council input.

Now that the City is locked into a legal agreement, what, if anything, is the City Council's role as Polar Park construction commences? How will you measure success as it relates to the Worcester Red Sox project through construction and beyond, and how would you address resident concerns that have been raised?

What would you do to combat the opioid crisis?

While heroin and other dangerous drugs are not unique to Worcester, the area has been particularly hard-hit by what officials call both a public health crisis and a public safety crisis, as the effects of addiction spread from those directly impacted to the entire community in the form of overburdened social services and higher crime rates. The City has tried various strategies to curb the crisis, ranging from equipping first responders with the overdose-reversing drug Narcan to implementing a clean needle exchange, in addition to general outreach. Some of those efforts, notably the needle exchange, have been debated on the Council floor.

Where does the opioid crisis rank on your priority list? How would you improve the City's response to the effects of addiction and drugs?

What is your vision and strategy for public transportation in Worcester?

The Worcester Regional Transit Authority depends on the state for much of its budget, and cuts at that level have led to tough decisions, including a fare hike in 2017. However, as a Research Bureau report outlined, that fare hike actually preceded a decrease in farebox revenue, and ridership has been declining at a substantial rate for years. Many acknowledge that higher public transit ridership would enhance mobility in the region and alleviate the increasing impact of traffic in the city, but historically the transit system has been underfunded. The Research Bureau examined the implications of eliminating fares entirely in a recent report, and other cities have tried different, sometimes creative ideas to reduce their communities' reliance on cars and private vehicles.

How important is public transportation in Worcester? Should the City attempt to improve service and ridership, and if so, what are some opportunities to do so?

What should the City do to promote safe streets and address enduring criminal activity?

The Worcester Police Department released data this year showing that nearly every type of crime, including violent incidents like homicides and shootings, decreased in 2018, with some categories seeing multi-year lows. Still, as an urban area, Worcester can at times struggle with perceptions from both outsiders and its own residents that it is unsafe.

What steps can the City take to improve perceptions about public safety and strengthen ongoing responses to address the scourges of drugs, gangs, and illegal guns?

How should the City balance the needs of the neighborhoods with the needs of the downtown?

Some argue Worcester focuses too much on the downtown area, through various economic development projects including building a municipal stadium for the Boston Red Sox' Triple-A minor league baseball affiliate. Some fear those downtown projects are detrimental to the neighborhoods, while others see a redeveloped downtown and broader investment as key to the city's future.

How should the City prioritize its economic development initiatives? Are there some new neighborhood initiatives that the City should undertake?

How should Worcester approach historic preservation?

Worcester has a rich history, some of which is represented in prominent or significant buildings. Many of these buildings have been demolished, whether because of neglect over the years or developers who want a new program for the property, with Notre Dame des Canadiens and Mount Carmel being prominent examples. Grassroots citizen groups have sprung up to advocate for preserving as many of these structures as possible, while others have said the City cannot afford to let nostalgia limit economic development.

What is the City's role in historic preservation? How would you balance respect for the past and planning for the future?

How should Worcester mitigate the financial burden of its tax-exempt properties?

Nearly 30 percent of Worcester's land area is owned by tax-exempt organizations. Two-thirds of that amount is held by government entities (including the City of Worcester), with religious organizations and educational institutions rounding out the top three. According to the City Assessor, tax-exempt property represents nearly \$5 billion in value. While these organizations are valuable to the community in many ways, their prevalence does mean less tax revenue to provide municipal services. Some not-for-profit organizations have negotiated Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreements with the City to compensate for lost tax revenue or impacts on public services, but others have not. The City's longtime debate over the Dover Amendment, which gives broad exemptions to nonprofits when it comes to zoning rules, is often touted as a way to gain leverage over tax-exempt entities.

Should the City request that tax-exempt organizations further contribute to the cost of government in Worcester? If so, what level of contribution is appropriate? How should such contributions be set and enforced?

How should Worcester deal with trash?

The City recently proposed a new recycling plan, suggesting clear bags instead of the current open-topped bins that allow garbage to blow across streets and neighborhoods on windy days. However, some have suggested that wheeled bins with lids would be a better solution. As a Research Bureau report pointed out, both solutions entail additional costs, although a pilot program with clear bags went over better than one with bins because of the unique needs of upper-floor housing units. Environmental groups contend that producing more plastic bags is antithetical to the eco-friendly strategy the city should be pursuing. The City's plan also came with a hike to the cost of yellow bags used for trash disposal, resuscitating a debate over whether the pay-as-you-throw model was succeeding in its goal of incentivizing recycling, or whether it was actually incentivizing illegal dumping. Other arguments rage over hours for drop-off centers, the best methods of minimizing windblown trash, and enforcement of anti-dumping rules.

What, if anything, should be done about Worcester's trash and recycling collection system? Would you advocate allocating tax dollars or new fees to a potential solution?

Should the City of Worcester require the hiring of residents as a condition of its support for economic development initiatives?

An economic development program generally includes efforts to create jobs, increase real estate investment, and raise the tax base. Tax incentive programs minimize gains in the third category in order to maximize gains in the first and second categories. Increasingly, the City has focused on job creation and local hiring over real estate development, and has sought to minimize impacts on the tax base through restrictions on the level of incentives and tax status of future owners. City tax incentive agreements now include language on local hiring, ownership tax status, employee benefits, and contractor suitability, but too many municipal obligations have the potential of turning a development incentive into a disincentive.

How should the City balance the need for private investment with the desire to achieve public goals?

Does Worcester have sufficient affordable housing?

According to the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, approximately 13.4 percent of Worcester’s housing stock is “affordable,” or government subsidized to ensure accessibility to those generally earning below 80 percent of the area median income. This amount of affordable housing exceeds the 10 percent minimum threshold outlined in Chapter 40B of the Massachusetts General Laws, exempting Worcester from state override of local zoning to allow the construction of new affordable units. No community adjacent to Worcester has reached the 10 percent threshold.

Should the City continue to subsidize the construction of affordable units, or should it advocate for the expansion of affordable housing in surrounding communities, and if so, how? If Worcester continues to build income-restricted housing, should those units be consolidated in existing lower-income neighborhoods or distributed throughout the city?

How would you ensure a smooth relationship between higher education institutions and the rest of the city?

Worcester is home to nine colleges and universities, with an estimated 35,000 students. Surveys have shown that these students are generally not venturing beyond their campuses as much as city leaders would like, and retaining graduates after school ends has been an enduring challenge, as the expansion of an educated workforce would be a boon for attracting businesses. But colleges also have their own needs and challenges, some of which are seasonal as the student body comes and goes, and there is sometimes friction between colleges and the neighborhoods that host them.

Is Worcester a “college town?” How would you accommodate students and colleges to capture the most benefit from their presence, and how would you mitigate any resident concerns? Are there City-led initiatives that could be undertaken relative to retaining college graduates in the workforce?

What is your attitude toward marijuana establishments in the city?

This year, the first recreational marijuana shop in Worcester opened its doors. The news was met with joy by many residents who voted for the successful measure to legalize the drug for recreational use in 2016, following the approval of medical marijuana in 2012, often citing medicinal uses and the downsides of over-incarceration for minor drug offenses. Other residents, familiar with criminal activity surrounding marijuana during the years when it was illegal, and worried about its reputation as addictive or a “gateway drug,” have called for Worcester to resist cannabis establishments, like other cities and towns that have passed bans or moratoriums.

What is your position on marijuana legalization? Are there any special considerations you would have for locating marijuana establishments, beyond the requirements for other businesses?

What can Worcester do about transportation connections to the rest of the state and country?

Leaders in the city have consistently called for better rail service to Boston, arguing that a convenient, accessible option to get to the state’s capital is important to maintain economic growth in the area. But control over key factors such as infrastructure investments and scheduling lies with the state, the MBTA, and the commuter rail operator. Likewise, the state, through Massport, owns Worcester Regional Airport, which has seen a growth in flights to places like New York and Detroit, but still has room for far more service.

How important are connections to Boston and beyond? What is the City’s role, if any, in working with the legislative delegation to improve these options?

How can Worcester improve the pedestrian experience and reduce pedestrian casualties?

According to a recent study of Massachusetts Department of Transportation data, 50 of the most dangerous intersections in the state are located in Worcester—more than in any other municipality. A walk around many neighborhoods illustrates the challenge that the road network poses to pedestrian safety. Additionally, as a result of legal challenges, the

City has stepped back from its efforts to limit panhandling and fundraising in public rights-of-way. The City Council has initiated discussions to lower the citywide speed limit to 25 miles per hour, although that and certain other safety measures inevitably impact traffic efficiency, another concern of many Worcester residents.

How would you work to improve pedestrian safety? Are you in favor of lowering the speed limit? How would you balance walkability and traffic flow?

What is your position on the use of eminent domain for economic development purposes?

The use of eminent domain, where the government acquires private property through a forced sale, can be controversial. While advocates say there are certain properties that will not live up to their potential if the government does not intervene, critics point to the possibility of government overreach. Recent eminent domain takings in Worcester have been focused on clearing space for Polar Park construction, but the city's Urban Revitalization Plan also approved a list of other properties for potential acquisition by the city through the Worcester Redevelopment Authority, including prominent buildings like the Midtown Mall.

When do you think it is appropriate to use eminent domain to take property? What would you like to see happen with properties on the city's list of potential takings?

How well does the City handle snow?

Every year, the City is criticized, on social media and elsewhere, for its snowplowing efforts, with residents singling out untimely trucks or incomplete plowing. While City officials have admitted room for improvement in some cases, they have also argued that public perception differs from reality, and that unreasonable expectations or a lack of communication may be to blame, instead of haphazard plowing. The City Council has approved more money for plowing in the past, including a nearly \$2 million snow budget increase in 2017.

Are the city's snow removal efforts better than public complaints allege, or are additional funding and/or major improvements necessary? What, if anything, would you change about winter storm operations?

Should Worcester look to regulate disruptive technologies like Airbnb, Uber, and Lyft?

In recent years, a number of new technologies have disrupted traditional industries like hospitality and taxi service. Airbnb enables residents to lease or rent homes as short-term lodging in competition with local hotels. Uber and Lyft enable car owners to compete directly with taxis and liveries to provide rides. These services can undermine currently regulated industries and create tension in neighborhoods when residentially zoned parcels assume a commercial use and activity level. However, many residents benefit from these businesses, and their presence can be seen as desirable for city livability.

Should Worcester work to further regulate the use of these new industries, and possibly seek to turn these types of activities into new public revenue sources?

How should the City Council engage with the Worcester Public Schools?

The Worcester Public Schools has its own governing body, the Worcester School Committee. But given the outsized importance of good schools on quality of life, property values, and economic success—not to mention their impact on the City budget—Councilors have in the past debated or questioned school policies. Some School Committee members have chafed at this perceived infringement, while others argue the City Council cannot simply ignore the public school system.

What is your view of the relationship between the City Council and the Worcester Public Schools?

How should Worcester engage more citizens in local government?

Voter turnout in the City of Worcester is low, with 85 percent of registered voters failing to vote in the 2017 municipal election. The city often has more than 25 vacancies for spots on boards and commissions, some of which have trouble fielding quorums for meetings—including the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee, which reduced its total number of members in an attempt to reduce vacancies. Worcester has more than 50 crime watch meetings, often with city representatives in attendance, but a Human Rights Commission study found that only a small demographic group—older and whiter than the general

population—was well-represented at these meetings.

What would you do to promote citizen involvement in local government and increase resident participation in elections and on boards and commissions?

Questions for School Committee Candidates

What is the role of the School Committee?

Under the Worcester City Charter, the School Committee has broad authority to take “general charge” of the public schools in the city. While the Superintendent of Schools is hired to manage the day-to-day administration of the system, the School Committee is charged with setting policy direction and, unlike the City Council, appointing officers and employees and defining responsibilities.

What do you believe is the appropriate role of the School Committee vis-à-vis the Superintendent in the active management of school district concerns?

What are your top priorities for the Worcester Public Schools? What will be your first item of business?

In order to build an informed community and support greater educational attainment, municipalities must provide a superior public school system with a diversity of educational options. While Worcester can claim many positive education metrics, it also struggles with challenges common to urban school districts, and many in and outside the system see room for improvement.

What are your priorities for the Worcester Public Schools and how will you seek to implement them? Only one item can be the first order of business—what will be your first initiative as a member of the School Committee?

In which Standing Committees would you like to serve?

The Mayor is responsible for appointing three committee members to each of the School Committee’s four Standing Committees. The Mayor may take individual members’ qualifications and preferences into account when assigning seats. Committee members have the ability to drive the conversation in a variety of subject areas, and can more easily prioritize their chosen causes.

On which Standing Committees would you like to serve? What makes you qualified in those areas, and what policies would you emphasize?

How would you address the school system’s budget situation?

The state formula that determines how much money Worcester gets from the state—a funding source that comprises a significant majority of its budget—underfunds WPS by more than \$90 million, according to school officials. And while the City this year exceeded their minimum contribution by \$2.1 million, or 0.5 percent, the school budget is still much smaller than many would like.

Is there a way to increase the school system’s total budget? If so, how does the School Committee accomplish that goal? If not, how do you work around consistently lean budgets? How do you feel about the potential of the City and other communities opting for a lawsuit to pursue an update to the state school funding formula?

Do you have confidence in the Superintendent?

Some groups and political candidates have called for the School Committee to fire or not renew the contract of current WPS superintendent Maureen Binienda. They have pointed to racism in the Worcester Public Schools, as evidenced by inequalities in student disciplinary data, saying the School Committee should hold district leadership accountable.

Do you have confidence in the Superintendent? Would you vote to fire the superintendent? Would you vote to renew her contract?

What is your vision for the WPS Strategic Plan?

The Worcester Education Collaborative and The Research Bureau partnered with the Worcester Public Schools in 2017 and 2018 to develop a community-led strategic plan. In September 2018 the Worcester School Committee voted unanimously to approve the resulting plan, *Defining Our Path: A Strategic Plan for Education in Worcester*.

What is the School Committee’s role in implementing the strategic plan? What areas or goals would you prioritize? The strategic plan was developed with community leadership—how would you continue to engage the community throughout implementation?

How should WPS address sex education?

Two different sex education curriculums were considered and dismissed this year, with both drawing complaints from different groups of residents. The decision on how to best teach WPS students about sexual health has been postponed until state standards are released. With high teen pregnancy rates and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in mind, many have pointed out that it is important to implement the right sex ed model sooner rather than later.

What are you looking for in a sex ed curriculum, and what must a model avoid for you to support it? What, if anything, should have been done differently in the past year's sex ed discussions and decision?

What should be done to improve the physical condition of educational facilities in Worcester?

WPS manages 62 public buildings throughout Worcester, consisting of 2.3 million square feet on 400 acres of land. Eleven of these buildings were built prior to 1900 and only five of these buildings were built or substantially renovated in the last 15 years. An older building stock brings challenges of maintenance and modernization. The City typically provides around \$3 million to \$5 million annually for school renovation projects.

With a new Nelson Place School completed, the South High building project underway, and renovation or replacement of Doherty Memorial High School on the horizon, how should the WPS identify, plan for, prioritize, and fund other major projects necessary to ensure safe environments conducive to learning?

How can the schools adapt to changing norms and technologies, and is there a way to anticipate and plan for future changes?

As society and technology changes, so does student behavior, and schools sometimes struggle to keep up with the pace of change. For example, the district's rules around cell phones have changed multiple times in the last few years, reflecting the increasing ubiquity of these devices. Further, rules against headphones have also had to be updated as trends develop. The strategic plan's emphasis on technology leads to a need to be innovative in addressing these changing circumstances.

What types of changes should the district enact to adapt to modern trends and norms? What changes on the horizon should the district be preparing for?

What new resources are needed to support a diverse student body?

As a large urban center, and a Gateway City community, Worcester is home to a diverse array of students and families from all backgrounds. But school systems often struggle to find the financial, human, and educational resources to accommodate such students. In the WPS, one-third of the students are English Language Learners and more than 90 languages, representing a variety of different cultures, are spoken in homes. More than half the student population is economically disadvantaged and nearly 20 percent of the student body has a disability.

Is WPS doing enough to serve an increasingly diverse student body? What would you do to improve the school experience for English Language Learners, Special Education students, and others who need extra attention? Should WPS undertake additional diversity initiatives as an employer?

What factors should be considered in siting new schools?

While new school construction can be an opportunity, the conversation around where to build a new Doherty High School has raised many important questions about how to choose a site. Space and topographical challenges at the current location led some to recommend exploring new sites, but ideas like razing Foley Stadium or Chandler Magnet Elementary come with their own disadvantages, like displacing community resources. Square footage for classrooms, acreage for athletic fields, parking, traffic, ease of access, disruption for students during construction, and impact on the surrounding neighborhood are all considerations, but the realities of building construction mean there is no perfect location, and officials need to make hard decisions about what to prioritize.

What factors should the School Committee consider when choosing a new school location? How would you balance the varied concerns of residents, students, and parents?

How should the School Committee handle the student dress code?

Although students are afforded far more freedom than those in schools with uniforms, Worcester Public Schools does set various standards for attire and clothing for students in class. These rules can sometimes be the subject of complaints that they are unfair to certain groups or demographics, though, and recent changes to policies governing skirts and hooded sweatshirts have addressed concerns that the dress code is overly strict.

How involved should the School Committee be in student dress code issues? What, if anything, could be improved in the current dress code and/or the process of developing the code?

How would you address concerns over disciplinary actions, especially as they relate to racially unequal discipline rates?

While suspensions and other disciplinary measures are always controversial, the Worcester Public Schools have drawn more criticism than usual this year for what some say is an unequal application of punishment. Latino students, for example, were suspended at around double the rate of white students last year, in line with a gap that has persisted for years. While other school districts have similar gaps in suspension rates among different demographic groups, critics say Worcester has not done enough to rectify those inequities. Suspensions of young children, sometimes in kindergarten or first grade, have also prompted concern, as the schools try to balance keeping classrooms disruption-free with making sure suspensions do not impede a student's educational experience.

How concerned are you by the schools' discipline data, especially as it relates to racial groups? What should the administration do to reduce overall suspensions and close the gap between students of color and white students?

What is your evaluation of and plan for school bus service?

WPS currently contracts with a third-party transportation company for school busing services. The contract for this service is expiring, and the fact that

only one company submitted a bid for a new contract—at a substantially higher rate—has revived discussion over whether the school department should switch to an in-house bus service. A finance office analysis found that doing so could save \$36 million over 10 years, but administrators have said the time and resources needed are being allocated to other initiatives. Regardless of who provides the service, parent complaints about the unreliability of current bus service are an issue.

Is the current school bus situation satisfactory? Would you support bringing transportation in-house?

Should teachers be held accountable for student performance?

Massachusetts regulations require that teachers be evaluated on competency and efficacy using metrics of student learning, growth, and achievement, judgments based on observations, and evidence of professional accomplishments. Federal and state policies promote the use of student achievement scores as an important measure of teaching quality. Yet students in Worcester often struggle against poverty, language, safety, and other external factors that are not as prevalent in suburban communities.

How should the WPS measure teacher effectiveness? How should student test scores get factored into teacher evaluations? What types of measures should be included in contracts between the WPS and the teachers union to improve student outcomes?

How would you improve public perception of the school system?

While WPS has its share of problems and challenges, there are some who believe negative coverage of the district is disproportionate to the actual hardships the schools face. Negative reviews of a school system can have a real effect on a community, as the quality of a school system is an important factor for new or relocating homeowners and residents. On the other hand, sugarcoating negative aspects of the school system could lead to apathy when it comes to fixing problems, and constituents want their elected officials to be honest and straightforward about any issues.

How accurate are the perceptions of WPS? What steps can be taken to improve the district's public image?

Worcester Regional Research Bureau, Inc.

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