



The Research Bureau

Questions for the 2021 Candidates for City Council and School Committee in Worcester

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Research in the Public Interest

**Questions for the 2021 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 2022-2023 political cycle.

City of Worcester 2021 Municipal Election

The 2021 Municipal Election is scheduled for Tuesday, November 2, from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Positions marked with an asterisk () require a Preliminary Election due to the size of the candidate field.
The Preliminary Election was held on Tuesday, September 14 in Districts 1 and 5.*

Worcester City Council—At Large (10 Candidates for 6 Positions)

- Morris A. Bergman
- Bill Coleman
- Donna M. Colorio
- Guillermo Creamer, Jr.
- Khrystian E. King
- Thu Nguyen
- Joseph M. Petty
- Peter A. Stefan
- Kate Toomey
- Matthew E. Wally

Worcester School Committee (8 Candidates for 6 Positions)

- Dianna L. Biancheria
- Laura Clancy
- Jermaine L. Johnson
- Jermoh V. Kamara
- Susan M. Mailman
- Molly O. McCullough
- Tracy O’Connell Novick
- Shanel C. Soucy

District 1 Councilor* (After Preliminary, now 2 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Richard Cipro
- Sean M. Rose

District 2 Councilor (2 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Candy F. Mero-Carlson
- Johanna Hampton-Dance

District 3 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- George J. Russell

District 4 Councilor (1 Candidate for 1 Position)

- Sarai Rivera

District 5 Councilor* (After Preliminary, now 2 Candidates for 1 Position)

- Etel Haxhijaj
- Gregory L. Stratman

Mayor (At Large Candidates could withdraw until Sept. 21)

- Bill Coleman
- Donna M. Colorio
- Joseph M. Petty
- Peter A. Stefan

Wednesday, October 13, 2021—Last day to register to vote in the 2021 municipal election.

*Questions for the 2021 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 approves the district budget, and has authority to transfer within line item accounts, so long as the overall amount remains within the City's appropriation. Additionally, the School Committee may hire or remove by majority vote the Superintendent and may establish and appoint the position of Assistant or Associate Superintendents. The Committee approves or disapproves those hirings, and upon the request of the Superintendent, provides an explanation of any disapproval.

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?

What are your priorities for the City of Worcester?

While the Mayor does not set independent policy for the city, they are able to highlight issues and build coalitions to move solutions forward.

What priorities will you have for the 2022-2023 term and how will you seek to accomplish them?

What are your priorities for the Worcester Public Schools?

As Chair of the Worcester School Committee, the Mayor is able to highlight issues and build coalitions to move solutions forward for the School system.

What priorities will you have for the 2022-2023 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 & Legislative Operations, Public Health & Human Services, Public Safety, Public Service & Transportation, Public Works, Traffic & Parking, Urban Technologies, Innovation & Environment, Veterans' Memorials, 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 legislative 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 legislative 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 10 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 \$20 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 \$16.28 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation while its commercial/industrial tax rate is \$36.20 per \$1,000. The Massachusetts median residential rate is \$15.24 per \$1,000 while the median commercial/industrial rate is \$17.39 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?

After the first season at Polar Park, do you have any feedback for the Worcester Red Sox or the Worcester Ballpark Commission? How would you address concerns from local businesses and residents while expanding economic spinoff?

This year marked the first season of the AAA Worcester Red Sox playing at the \$160 Million publicly-owned Polar Park.

Despite the pandemic and 25% attendance restrictions at the onset of the season, there were 362,559 attendees over the course of the year. The team has announced that ranks among the top ten of 120 teams nationally in Minor League Baseball.

In April, the City Council voted 9-2 to create a seven member Worcester Ballpark Commission to oversee the general operation of Polar Park. Once appointed, their duties will include monitoring the governance documents; issuing rules and regulations for use of the ballpark; issue approvals for ‘city events’ at the ballpark; and keeping the City Manager informed on issues that could have a material impact on the community and/or the ballpark.

How would you measure success of Polar Park moving forward, and given concerns on parking and local businesses, do you have any specific responses to suggest to the team or the Commission?

What are your priorities for the City’s federal relief funds?

The City received the first half of the \$110 Million in direct relief funds from the American Rescue Plan Act, with an additional \$36 Million expected from county-designated funding. The State is deliberating how to best distribute funds under its control.

The City Manager has proposed a plan for using the relief funds directly received by Worcester, including community based initiatives such as the Affordable Trust Fund, technology needs such as broadband access, public health, and public assets and infrastructure. Through a number of public listening sessions and an online survey, the City solicited the perspectives of Worcester residents on these priorities.

What is your position on the City Manager’s plan for the federal relief funds? What are your priorities for the best use of these funds to meet the City’s long-term needs?

Would you support a continuation of the WRTA’s current suspension of fares? What is your vision and strategy for public transportation in Worcester?

Since March 2020, the Worcester Regional Transit Authority has suspended the collection of fares. The most recent extension was in May, when the WRTA Advisory Board voted to continue not collecting fares for another six months.

These extensions of the suspension of fare collections have come with the support of the Zero Fare WRTA Coalition, and after a Research Bureau 2020 addendum to a 2019 report, *The Implications of a Fare-Free WRTA*. That report noted that the WRTA depends on the state for much of its revenue, and so whenever cuts are made at that level, tough decisions have been made on service and fares. One such situation led to a fare increase in 2017 that 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.

Do you support the permanent extension of fare free service on the WRTA? How else should the City attempt to improve service and ridership?

Do you support the City Manager’s Executive Order on Racism and the resulting reforms such as a new means of investigating employee and public complaints, and instituting police body cameras in 2022?

In February, the City Manager issued an Executive Order, noting “it is undeniable that structural and institutional racism permeate our entire society, at all levels of government, and in all institutions,” in response to a City Council resolution in June 2020 acknowledging structural and institutional racism as a public health crisis. The Executive Order lays out a series of reforms, such as a city-wide racial equity audit, creating a Division of Investigations, removing School Resource Officers, engaging in community conversations about police body cameras, establishing an Equity Cabinet, and creating an online dashboard with data from the Worcester Police Department.

Do you support these steps? How else do you think the City Council should take action on these issues?

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 such as building Polar Park. 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 be addressing housing concerns?

With Worcester reaching a population of 206,000 and having been identified as one of the most competitive housing markets in the country, there are growing calls for further attention to housing. One such response earlier this year was the City's creation of an Affordable Housing Trust Fund. During the ensuing discussion on the potential use of federal relief funds, the Housing Trust Fund has been raised as a potential beneficiary. The potential adoption of the Community Preservation Act (CPA), has also been identified as a potential source of funds, since it would add a surcharge on local property taxes to qualify for a 32.3% match from the Commonwealth and used for historical preservation, open space, or housing. In 2018, the Worcester City Council didn't approve of a local ballot question on the CPA. Statewide, 187 communities have adopted the Act, including other cities and abutting towns Grafton, Shrewsbury, and West Boylston.

What is the City's role in addressing housing concerns? How do you envision the Housing Trust Fund playing a role, and what is your position on the Community Preservation Act?

How should Worcester deal with trash and recycling?

This year's budget included the new Comprehensive Clean City Plan, which includes new litter reduction initiatives, expanded hours at yard waste drop off sites, and a flat fee for bulk waste dropoff, while relying on a 25 cent increase in trash bag fees.

To address complaints of blown trash during windy days, the plan includes a shift to domed recycling bins, a potential remedy examined by a 2018 Research Bureau report. The new recycling containers are expected in mid to late November, and are planned to be delivered first to the Wednesday collection day area, then Thursday, Friday, Tuesday, and Monday collection day areas. This rollout will be accompanied by citywide multi-lingual education and enforcement campaign to reduce contamination and increase participation in recycling.

Do you feel the Comprehensive Clean City Plan and shift to domed recycling bins will address all concerns with the City's trash collections and recycling? Do you feel further measures are needed, and if so, how should they be funded?

How should Worcester respond to the need for improved broadband access that has been highlighted during the pandemic?

As noted in The Research Bureau report last year, the city's residents depend upon Charter Spectrum for broadband services. According to federal data, prior to the pandemic, 33% of city households lacked a broadband internet subscription, and 18% had no internet access at all. The pandemic has only exacerbated this situation, and as an emergency response, the City and School department have invested in hot spot distribution to those students in need. To examine long term solutions, the City Manager has convened a Municipal Broadband Taskforce, and has budgeted up to \$12 Million in federal relief funds for further efforts.

Do you support municipal action on broadband access? Do you see other opportunities to improve internet accessibility?

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?

Since the ballot question on marijuana legalization passed in 2016, the City has adopted relevant zoning measures as well as a cap on retail licenses. With these measures in place, the city is currently host to eleven marijuana retailers.

What is your position on marijuana retail establishments in the city? Do you feel any additional municipal policies need to be considered for such 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.

While the pandemic dramatically impacted both commuter rail ridership and airport service, both are coming back. The commuter rail schedule was adjusted in April to reflect evolving needs for increased midday service, by shifting on-the-hour service on weekdays between 5AM and 7PM. The Airport is benefiting from JetBlue resuming service in August, and Delta and American Airlines announcing they would also resume flight service in November.

How important are these connections to Boston and

beyond? What is the City’s role, if any, in working with the legislative delegation and state officials to improve these options?

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

Over 2020, police data shows 178 pedestrian accidents took place in Worcester, which tragically included some fatalities. As noted in a 2019 Research Bureau report, walkability is a key attribute of modern cities, with significant benefits for safety, community health, environmental sustainability, and community development. In 2018, the City instituted a Complete Streets Policy that received state score of 97 out of 100, and improvements have been made to Kelley Square and Main Street. The city is conducting a Complete Streets redesign project for Chandler Street with MassDOT, due to its status as one of the highest crash cluster locations in the Commonwealth.

How else should the City improve pedestrian safety? How would you balance walkability and traffic flow?

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 a rate hike for the snow removal contractors that are used, and the current budget is at \$6 million for snow removal.

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?

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 82 percent of registered voters failing to vote in the 2019 municipal election. This is part of a trend; in municipal election years, Worcester hasn't broken 20% turnout since 2015.

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?

How should Worcester address its OPEB liability?

Upon retirement, vested Worcester employees are eligible for both pension and certain other post-employment benefits (OPEB) such as health care.

As additional employees join the ranks of the retirees, and insurance costs increase, this amount continues to expand dramatically— as of June 2020, it reached \$1 billion and is expected to exceed \$2.5 billion in 30 years.

To respond, the City has established an OPEB Trust Fund with an accompanying Board of Trustees, while making ongoing contributions. In the current budget, the City invests \$805,255 towards the OPEB Liability Trust Fund, a 10% increase from the previous year. As part of the City's Financial Integrity Plan, thirty percent of the City's 'free cash' will be likewise invested once certified in the fall.

What additional steps should the City take to address its OPEB costs and reduce this significant liability on the City's balance sheet?

How can economic development in the City be most effectively balanced with the Green Worcester Plan's implementation?

In April, the City Council endorsed The Green Worcester Plan, which is “a strategic framework for an integrated and systematic approach to making Worcester one of the most sustainable and climate-resilient mid-sized cities in America by 2050.” The Plan calls for municipal goals such as by 2030, a hundred percent renewable energy for city facilities; by 2045, a hundred percent renewable energy in all sectors, including heating and transportation; and a reduction of waste through a Zero Waste Master plan. The Plan is intended to align with new state policies and is integrated into this year's municipal budget with such recommendations as creating a Department of Sustainability and Resilience.

How can the City balance the needs of businesses, residents, and the economy, with the sustainability goals of the Green Worcester Plan? Are there other steps the City should take on these issues?

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 can the Worcester Public Schools best utilize the new Student Opportunity Act funding and federal relief funding?

Funding from the state’s Student Opportunity Act has started to have an impact on the Worcester Public Schools, and is expected to provide approximately \$21 million in FY22 and \$13.2 million thereafter. On the federal level, the Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds (ESSER) will provide \$122.5 million between FY21 and FY24, with approximately \$40 million in FY22.

What are your priorities for this unprecedented federal and state funding? While they are being allocated during the Schools’ public budgeting process, do you feel there should be any additional public planning process used for these funds?

With the Superintendent search underway, what criteria will you use in the selection?

With the School Committee not renewing Superintendent Binienda’s contract, a national search process has begun. The process is being led by the ad hoc superintendent search committee, with a search consultant selected later in the fall and a public process to develop the position posting. Ultimately, the timeline is to select a candidate in April, with a transition into the job in May and June, followed by their official first day on July 1.

What are the metrics you’ll use to evaluate candidates? What is your top priority for the next Superintendent?

What is your vision for updating the WPS Strategic Plan, while integrating community engagement and data analysis?

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*. Since then, circumstances have changed dramatically through the pandemic. Some of the plan’s goals have been achieved, and

others have seen a lack of progress.

What are your priorities for the update to the strategic plan? How would you plan to capitalize on the cultural, academic, and community resources in Worcester?

What is your position on the Worcester Public Schools' new sexual education curriculum?

After years of deliberations, the School Committee adopted a new sexual education curriculum, Rights, Respect, Responsibility, which allows parents to opt-out.

Supporters of the sexual education curriculum, including the City's health and human services commissioner, have pointed out Worcester's high teen pregnancy and STD rates. Opponents objected to sexual topics being included in school curriculum across all ages, other than abstinence-based education.

Do you support the implementation of the new sexual education curriculum? Do you believe that the Worcester Public Schools should take any additional action?

During the pandemic, Worcester Public Schools received significant HVAC improvements, but what else should be done to improve the physical condition of educational facilities?

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. While typically \$3 to \$5 Million is provided for school renovations, due to the pandemic, this year \$15 Million was spent on HVAC improvements such as bipolar ionization units.

How should the WPS identify, plan for, prioritize, and fund other major projects necessary to ensure safe environments conducive to learning?

With the shift to remote learning during the pandemic, the Schools and City expended significant effort to distribute chromebooks and hotspots to needy families, but how else can the Schools lead on technology?

The strategic plan for the Worcester Public Schools called for ambitious goals on technology integration with the classroom curriculum. Some of those goals, such as chromebook distribution, have been met, and the Schools and City implemented a strong emergency response to the pandemic with hot spot distribution. With the importance of technology and internet access beyond the pandemic, it is imperative that the Schools continue to innovate and meet the needs of their students across changing circumstances.

How will you ensure that these technology innovations continue, and receive adequate funding and support? How else should the Schools respond and integrate technology into curriculum across grades?

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?

How should school safety be addressed in Worcester?

Under the City Manager's Executive Order on Racism, the City's School Resource Officers (SRO) are being removed from the Worcester Public Schools. That program stations a full-time police officer at each of the five high schools, with another two officers for the rest of the schools, and has been in place since 2015. In

September, an SRO from Burncoat High responded to an after school incident in front of Burncoat Middle, leading to assault and weapons charges for three teens. To develop an alternative school safety plan, the City Manager has appointed a task force that is researching other models.

What would you like to see in the new school safety plan?

Do you have any concerns with the updated 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 so have been subject to considerable discussion and debate in recent years. Going into this school year, the School Committee adopted a new inclusive policy, while still prohibiting clothing with offensive messaging. The new policy allows for culturally appropriate clothing rather than having stringent standards, and students can't be disciplined or removed from class solely due to a dress code violation.

How involved should the School Committee be in student dress code issues? Should any further steps be taken on the WPS dress 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 in recent years for what some say is an unequal application of punishment. Latino students, for example, are suspended at a disproportionately higher rate, 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?

Do you support the shift to an in-house bus service for the Worcester Public Schools?

This year, the Worcester School Committee voted against an administration recommendation to renew the busing contract with Durham Transportation, and instead move to an in-house system next year. The decision came after years of complaints by families, and the School Committee issuing a breach of contract letter earlier this year to the provider. Financially, a 2019 internal study showed such a transition could lead to \$30 million in cost savings over the next ten years. These circumstances are compounded by a school bus driver shortage affecting other districts, and even leading the Governor to mobilize the National Guard as bus drivers in for some districts, including Worcester.

How will you ensure that in-house busing service will be a better model and more reliable service?

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?

What policies would you implement to ensure students are supported academically, socially, and emotionally?

The pandemic and resulting shift to online learning has had significant impacts on students, both in Worcester and statewide. Extensive studies have shown that remote learning and the pandemic has increased students' social and emotional needs across grade levels. On an academic front, MCAS scores dropped in both Worcester and statewide in all subjects for third through eighth grade, while in tenth grade, there was a corresponding drop in math, but an increase in English Language Arts scores. To respond, the state developed an acceleration road map, and this month, Worcester Public Schools' staff are reviewing the results and developing plans to address identified academic gaps.

How else should the Worcester Public Schools respond to the pandemic's impact on students' academic performance and social/emotional needs?

Worcester Regional Research Bureau, Inc.

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Deborah Penta

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Vice President for Finance:

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