

**2019
FAIRFAX COUNTY
VOTER GUIDE**

**CANDIDATES FOR
School Board**



**Who will ensure that our schools are a safe place for
immigrant students and their families?**

April 24, 2019



About ACLU People Power Fairfax

ACLU People Power Fairfax is an independent grassroots, volunteer organization advocating for equal justice for all members of our community, including undocumented immigrants. There are over 1,600 People Power volunteers in Fairfax County. Our efforts are guided by ACLU's [Freedom Cities](#) platform; they reflect the views of our members, not those of the ACLU of Virginia affiliate.

Our group was a leader in the successful effort to convince the Fairfax Sheriff to require ICE to obtain a criminal judicial warrant to detain Fairfax inmates past their release date. We also successfully advocated for the Fairfax County School Board (SB) to adopt changes to its school policing policies that help protect immigrants. For further information about the Fairfax People Power group, contact Diane Burkley Alejandro at dburkleyalejandro@hotmail.com, or visit us on Twitter [@PeoplePowerFfx](#) and Facebook [@peoplepowerffx](#). For further information about ACLU People Power, visit <https://peoplepower.org/>.

About Our Concerns and the Questionnaire

Over [12,000 Fairfax residents are currently in deportation proceedings](#), three times higher than in more populous Philadelphia or Manhattan. Because [85% of immigrant families are of mixed status](#), the impact on Fairfax students is profound. FCPS does not inquire into students' immigration status and maintains confidentiality of student information as required by federal law (FERPA). Even so, information sharing during police investigations is not prohibited, even in schools. The current climate is spreading fear among immigrant students that any information they provide about themselves, or their loved ones, may be shared with ICE. Some students say that they have not reported bullying and assaults, and many experience psychological trauma. A [recent national study](#) found a 10% decrease in Latino enrollment within two years of police partnering with ICE.

As an aid to voters, we submitted a questionnaire to candidates for the School Board asking for their positions on reforming SB policies that may undermine the ability of immigrant students to thrive. This Voter Guide includes all candidates responding to the questionnaire who are seeking to represent the County At Large or an individual District. Candidates who elected not to respond, such as unopposed incumbents who subsequently submit response, will be included when the guide is updated prior to the November election.

As a non-partisan organization, we do not endorse or oppose any candidates. The responses below are verbatim, except that the names of our and other advocacy groups have been redacted so as not to imply an endorsement where none exists. Additionally, the formatting of candidate responses has been modified and names of family members redacted.

Topics Covered

Question 1	Background Relevant to Immigration
Question 2	Addressing Decrease in Latino Students
Question 3	Declaring Schools a “Safe Zone”
Question 4	Support for SRO Program
Question 5	Prohibiting SRO Assistance to ICE Civil Enforcement
Question 6	Addressing Disparity in Discipline
Question 7	Ensuring Full Participation by Parents

HUNTER MILL DISTRICT

Responding Candidate: [Melanie Meren](#)

(Did not respond: Laura Ramirez Drain & Andy Sigle)

QUESTION 1: BACKGROUND: *How has your background prepared you to address and resolve issues unique to undocumented students or family members, as well as those of common concern to other disadvantaged groups?*

My entire career has been motivated by my desire to ensure that children have the opportunity to be successful in life. For me, that means a quality education for all kids.

After I first visited the nation's capital as a teen, I knew I wanted to return to Washington, DC to help improve education on a massive scale. Ten years later I returned after earning my Master's in Public Policy on a half scholarship, and made a beeline for the U.S. Department of Education.

I was hired as a Presidential Management Fellow to work in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, on the Titles I and II programs, the year that No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was enacted - 2002. I managed a \$15,000,000 discretionary grant to strengthen early childhood educator professional development for educators working with students living in poverty. I also monitored a \$75,000,000 early literacy program aimed at serving that same population of students. And, I helped implement the then-\$14,000,000 Title I program, including conducting 8 week-long, visits to states to monitor use of funds.

While grappling with the onerous requirements that NCLB placed on already under resourced schools with underserved populations, I had to find solutions for these schools using a limited set of resources and conduct budget oversight on local programs. My diligence here recovered over \$500,000 for students that otherwise would have been misdirected to other expenditure areas - thus, improving the quality of education for the nation's most vulnerable students.

The population of students was disadvantaged economically, socially, and predominantly from racial and ethnic groups that meet the "other disadvantaged group" definition.

Here in Fairfax I have continued to dedicate my time advancing similar goals of socioeconomic and racial equity. I currently co-chair the Human Resources Advisory Committee (HRAC), a committee of residents appointed by current School Board members to advise the Fairfax County School Board by evaluating equity in hiring and retention of teachers and instructional staff.

I am currently advocating, as a candidate, for a staff Ombudsman(woman) that would protect employees from pernicious behavior and ensure that instructors are able to bring concerns for their undocumented students to a neutral party. I am also advocating as a candidate and as recommendation in the HRAC's final report that teachers be provided the appropriate professional development needed to fully educate our immigrant student. I am aware that teachers often cite a lack of support to fully educate English Language Learners and immigrant students - we need to address this.

I previously was appointed to serve on the School Board's Minority Student Achievement Oversight Committee (MSAOC), to help realize gains in student achievement where it is needed most. It was very similar in spirit to my first role at the Department of Ed.

In a personal capacity, I am involved with local neighborhood and county groups that advocate for protection for undocumented families and their students - including protesting the enforcement of separation of families by the Federal Administration. I believe that students - no matter their documentation status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or special education needs - should be able to attend public school, including in Fairfax County.

QUESTION 2: DROP IN LATINO ENROLLMENT. *Latino enrollment dropped materially last year, while other groups' populations stayed the same or increased. What do you believe are the possible causes for this drop? Will you commit to undertaking a thorough review of the matter, including whether it is related to immigration enforcement in Fairfax County?*

Yes. I absolutely commit to undertaking a thorough review of this matter. My interest is to both understand the situation and needs of our Latino students and families, and also to commit FCPS to useful data analysis on a regular basis.

As to the cause, it is attributable to the overt humanitarian crisis that was deliberately crafted and enacted by the current Federal Administration. Their stunning disregard for basic human and civil rights in a variety of contexts and directed at a variety of groups, populations, and sometimes individuals must stop and is the principal driver of the Latinx enrollment dip.

Relatedly, I am a strong advocate for equitable school boundary enforcement. Many school boundaries create artificial conditions for isolating along economic lines and this must be curbed by the next School Board. I hope to shine a light on how Latinx neighborhoods are functionally segregated sometimes and that schools are witnessing a drop in Latino student attendance. These are interrelated problems and we should use the transparency mechanism of School Board review to bring this issue to parents, the County Board, and state authorities who oversee education throughout the state.

QUESTION 3: SAFE ZONE. *Currently FCPS relies on ICE's adherence to its sensitive location policy to keep them off of school property. That policy can be changed at any time and has been breached elsewhere. Do you support, and will you advocate for, declaring schools a "safe zone" as other jurisdictions across the country have done?*

Yes, absolutely, I support and will advocate for "safe zone" declarations. ICE has repeatedly breached its legal mandate; regularly abuses authority in the public space as caught in multiple, independent videos in the recent past; and has experienced little to no oversight prior to January 2019. They do not belong on school grounds or even near them as it has become practice in some parts of the country for ICE to wait outside schools to detain individuals dropping off or picking up their children.

I am also connected with Herndon Reston Indivisible (HRI), one of many organizations working on immigration policy. I have learned much from the immigration advocates there, and am eager to continue those relationships to stay on top of the situation in Fairfax and particularly for my Hunter Mill constituents.

Our students today need to feel socially and emotionally supported - including feeling safe - in order to be successful in school. If children don't feel safe, school is not a priority - surviving is. Increased

anxiety and absenteeism from school to avoid interactions with ICE are barriers for our students that we must address. Having safe zones is one solution.

QUESTION 4: POLICE IN SCHOOLS. *Do you support the placement of School Resource Officers (SROs) in schools? If so, do you believe they should be assigned to elementary schools as well? Why or why not?*

I support School Resource Officers in schools if they have very clear directives and training that clarifies their role as one of support for children in school, with the understanding that this is a different role than that of a Fairfax County Police Officers who handle criminal violations.

As with many FCPS policies and programs I've observed, there is much discretion left at the school level for services that would do better being more standardized across the system. I've monitored the SRO discussions over the last few years among FCPS, Fairfax Police, and advocacy groups. My understanding is that the light has shined upon an inconsistent implementation of SRO purview, and awareness is now raised about students - particularly our students of color - being shuffled into the criminal justice system for offenses not meriting such a path.

I support safe schools - that means schools are safe from violence, and safe from social and emotional harm. Our students are children. We are meant to teach them about being their best selves and the expectations that society has for them. School is a place to practice that learning, and there should be consequences for gross mistakes that children make. However, consequences of criminal violations should be reserved for only the most egregious student actions, and should be addressed by Fairfax County Police - and then, include an age-appropriate juvenile justice program that helps children get back to a place of being successful in society.

The policies governing SRO work must be clear so we always strive to limit the number of children being criminalized. Beyond policies, we must have appropriate, consistent training for all SROs on the duties of their jobs. FCPS should regularly evaluate SRO work and update SRO training.

I am eager to learn more about policies and practices regarding SROs and discipline, and how they can be modified to keep our children in school so they can be educated towards their own personal pathway for success. If SRO responsibilities and are clarified and consistently implemented, then this can open further discussion about the role of SROs in elementary schools.

QUESTION 5: SROS & ICE. *Because local law enforcement is responsible for most arrests that lead to ICE detention and deportation, the role of police in the schools can have a major impact on students and their families. Do you support the following revisions to the SRO program? Will you commit to seeking their enactment by the School Board?*

a. SROs have broad access to students' personal information, including contact information for parents that ICE can use to arrest family members. If a criminal investigation occurs, FERPA protections do not apply to the law enforcement record. There currently is no provision prohibiting officers from sharing this information with ICE. Police access to student information must be strictly limited, and they should be prohibited from sharing that information with outside agencies unless otherwise required by law.

Yes, I support prohibiting or otherwise circumscribing access to student information and that information should not be shared unless otherwise required by law. I do commit to supporting this if I am elected.

b. SROs can bring charges against a student for any criminal violation, even minor offenses that could be handled by discipline alone. This puts an undocumented student at risk of deportation. We need a bright line limiting police investigation to serious crimes.

Yes, I agree that students must always be protected from unnecessary action when school discipline achieves a better goal. Serious crimes are the only category of offenses that warrant police intervention. I commit to supporting this clarification on the School Board.

c. FCPS rules give its attorneys the discretion to honor a civil administrative ICE "warrant" to gain access to a student or their records. These requests have not been independently reviewed and often are issued in error. FCPS rules should be revised to make clear that only a criminal judicial warrant will be accepted.

Yes, I agree with revising these rules. FCPS rules should require that only criminal judicial warrants are accepted. I will support this measure if elected.

QUESTION 6: DISPARITY IN DISCIPLINE. *FCPS' own data shows that Black students are three times more likely and Latino students about two times more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions. How do you propose to revise the disciplinary process to ensure that it is fair, impartial, without prejudice and that the process takes into account the total well-being of the students, their rights and the community's interest in safe schools?*

First, as a School Board member, I want to know the exact details from start to finish of what the School Board's role is in discipline proceedings, including suspensions. This is a serious responsibility, and I want to be fully trained in the options for action and the parameters of the School Board's role. Ideas to revise the disciplinary process and also institute disciplinary prevention tactics include:

- Examine the School Board's disciplinary policy and procedures for oversight and action. This may involve a task force or committee. Also, I'd like to understand how the current relationship of the Board with the Community Criminal Justice Board could be better leveraged.
- Involvement of more than one administrator or teacher in disciplinary actions. Students must experience a disciplinary process that is fair, impartial, and accounts for differences of educator opinion. Meaning, any major disciplinary action must be a process that involves more than one administrator or teacher and clearly documents and evidences those infractions warranting suspensions.
- Peer-to-peer leadership development and other de-escalation programs that encourage peer intervention in sensitive learning spaces. Helping students help each other may be more effective than an adult in these situations.
- Have regular, honest communications with [local advocacy groups] - and trust their counsel and act upon in. I want to work together to find solutions.
- Improve the role of SROs as stated above.

- Hire a more diverse workforce. Research, [such as this collection from Harvard](#), demonstrates “consistent evidence that exposure to same-race teachers is associated with reduced rates of exclusionary discipline for Black students.”
 - Provide meaningful education that captivates and inspires students so they are eager to be in school, and not jeopardize their experience there. We as a system should be trying to actively decrease disciplinary actions among any student group. Keeping students engaged and joyful in their education is a strategy.

My earlier response about boundary equity is relevant here, too. It is my position as a candidate and a parent that creating socially, economically, and racially equitable districts that encourage interaction across communities will enable richer and happier environments in- and outside of public schools. My aim here is to decrease the all-too-common stigmatization of young Black and Latino students, and break cycles of stereotypes that contribute to attitudes surrounding suspension, especially as it relates to young men.

In an operational sense at the schools, my work on the HRAC informs us here – surrounding students with positive role models from all ethnic, gender, sexual orientation, and racial backgrounds encourages diversity and acceptance. It gives students of all backgrounds the ability to learn and grow in an environment that looks like the world they will someday enter, and it is the responsibility of HRAC and the School Board to create the conditions that attract and retain the best workforce our public schools can have.

QUESTION 7: PARENTAL RIGHTS. *How would you revise FCPS policies to ensure that parents are fully advised of and allowed to participate in SRO and disciplinary investigations prior to any interview of the student? How would you accommodate immigrant parents who fear coming to schools and being in contact with officials? How would you ensure that appropriate translators are available for these interactions?*

Parents must absolutely be informed and involved in any disciplinary investigation, and it should be the policy of FCPS that no major legal action or other measure take place before they consent to a fair, transparent process.

For those special situations where language barriers exist or parents fear coming to schools, they should be given the ability to designate a third-party to represent them. In situations where it is not legally viable to pursue this option through a non-professional third party, I would encourage entities such as the [advocacy groups] to intervene on behalf of parents who do not necessarily understand the full breadth of their rights. A clear process and line of communication should be in place for smooth and timely attention to these situations.

I would like to see stronger, consistent, timely, and accessible communications coming from FCPS, for starters via traditional methods such as email, website, and letters home.

These communications must be provided in languages spoken at home.

Furthermore, I want to share this experience about translation supports in FCPS. I'm aware that we do have translation services for materials and for speakers at meetings - FCPS publishes content in multiple languages, and schools need to

schedule the translator service in advance. The former I've seen improve drastically since my first advocacy work with FCPS over 10 years ago.

However, I had an experience recently where an elementary school PTA president wanted to obtain live translation services for an important meeting in our community. She had no idea this service was available through FCPS - it was actually FCPS Superintendent Brabrand who revealed this information at a Fairfax County Council of PTAs meeting! He pledged his support to get an in-person translator for the event, and he delivered. The PTA president also learned at that meeting about the services of FCPS' parent liaisons who can be scheduled to present about cultural sensitivity and training.

When I attended that school's PTA meeting soon afterwards, I received a handheld translator device with headset - everyone did, and there were about 50 attendees. The meeting had an FCPS-provided translator, and three FCPS parent liaisons who presented about how immigrant parents can perceive the American school experience. The presenters spoke in Spanish, Arabic, and English and the participants had to use the headsets or not, depending on their native language. This not only was helpful for our ELL families to participate fully, but also provided the experience for we native English speakers to rely on a translator, which put us in the shoes of our immigrant neighbors.

The meeting was very communal. People did not seem tense and uncomfortable. It was a welcoming setting.

My observations are that many schools, teachers, and parents do know about these FCPS-funded and available offerings. Furthermore, in this case, the PTA used locally-raised PTA funds to pay for the devices. Availability of the devices shouldn't rely on local fundraising dollars - they need to be readily available to any school community in FCPS that needs them. They are an essential communications tool. We need to do much more to make information and tools like these available districtwide so we can include more of our community members.

Communications campaigns and sharing the information about available resources in trainings and staff meetings are some initial ideas for how to better accommodate immigrant parents. I want to review cultural sensitivity training offerings, attendance, and usefulness, and the related policies that bring this information into classrooms and homes. Increasing awareness of how people of different cultures access and accept information from school is essential in today's world. The parent liaisons are experts in this - just like about translator devices and services, more FCPS staff and families need to know about the availability of these supports. And we need enough of these supports to meet families' needs.

Community partnerships are also essential when it comes to engaging families in spaces where they are comfortable - whether it's a cultural social group, religious congregation, or even the local international grocery store. We have a plethora of community groups that can help FCPS communicate with families. Strong partnerships here can bridge the gaps that FCPS faces.