

## **Jeff Wilhite, School Board District 1**

1. What has been your role(s) in supporting our JeffCo Public Schools in the past 5 years?

In addition to guiding my children to successful graduations; I have had a variety of roles serving the Jeffco Public Schools community. At a district level, I served on the Capital Asset Advisory Committee, helping oversee the seven hundred-million-dollar capital program. I Co-Chair the Jeffco Charter Schools Consortium and previously sat on the District's Accountability committee, reviewing academic performance, and working with other members to make recommendations on improving opportunities. I was a member of the 5A and 5B team and have served on the Colorado State Educational Success Task Force.

Serving our local public schools, I am the interim President of the Mountain Phoenix Community School Foundation. I was both treasurer and chair of the Mountain Phoenix Community School's board and have served in the same roles on the Rocky Mountain Academy of Evergreen's board. I was president of the Evergreen High School marching band boosters club and was a board member of the Evergreen High Schools Foundation.

2. How will you know you are successful at the end of your term? What is your top goal?

When my term on the Jeffco School Board has ended I will look back and know my term was successful if the stewardship of all the of resources entrusted to Jeffco Schools has significantly improved. We must first improve the stewardship over Jeffco students' futures. I started my career as a mental health therapist and know that we need to significantly improve how we allocate the funds designed to help students' emotional wellbeing. We also know that there are significant achievement gaps between students of different races. We can't be serious about serving all students when such huge gaps exist. We must steward our resources to be sure every Jeffco student has access to high quality instruction and opportunities.

All of this is achievable if we steward our governance processes and that is my top goal. For six years we have seen achievement results plummet while district overhead spending continued to increase. Our Capital Improvement Program accumulated more than \$100 million in cost overruns. These are all painful signs that the Jeffco Board of Education has not been exercising effective governance over the district. I have a proven track record of stewarding organizations through difficult improvement challenges; Jeffco students and staff deserve board members with these skills.

3. The COVID-19 pandemic has created enormous challenges for our schools. What can we do to meet the educational, emotional and social needs of our students during the pandemic?

To meet the educational needs of our students we must ensure the additional funds we are given are spent on programs to address the lost academic opportunities. We will never be able to give prom or on-time graduations back to students, but we must make sure every Jeffco student has the opportunity to catch up their learning. We must also invest part of these funds in ensuring our schools and classrooms are as safe as possible. We know that improving air circulation and cleaning is one effective way to keep schools safe. While there are many other layers that can also be used, we must ensure we have the highest quality air in our facilities.

To meet the emotional and social needs of our students, I know from my work as a therapist requires a multi-tiered approach. Jeffco must have a clear understanding of the clinical needs of our students' mental health challenges and that Jeffco has the appropriate mix of staff with the skills and certifications needed to address them. We must also continue to invest in the social emotional learning specialist programs that are having preventative impacts and helping keep students and staff mental wellbeing healthy.

4. Our history is a dramatic story. How would you ensure a more accurate and dynamic teaching of our history?

As the dad of two very different Jeffco graduates, I know that the way students engage in their learning can be very different. Some students will learn best from reading texts and books and immersing themselves in different resources. Other students learn best from experiential opportunities. Addressing all the varied learning styles with dynamic teaching is the key to keeping students engaged. I know that all Jeffco parents want what is best for their children and want them to learn accurate history. From being a therapist, I know two people can have exactly the same experience and describe it from much different perspectives. We must ensure that Jeffco Schools prepares students with facts and the skills necessary to discern facts from perspectives.

5. In your view, does "school choice" (including choice enrollment, magnet schools and charter schools) contribute to segregating our schools and make it more difficult to meet the needs of all of our students? How would you address this issue?

More than 40% of Jeffco families use some type of school choice, not only charters, but also option schools and neighborhood schools within the district that are not their neighborhood school. As a Board member with experience on two Jeffco charter school boards and as a parent at a neighborhood school, my personal experience is that our neighborhood school had a far more homogeneous population than either of the charter schools with 100% choice enrolled students. If there was data showing that "school

choice” was creating segregated schools that would be something I would be interested in seeing. All of the data I have seen shows students that choice into other schools increase the diversity of schools in Jeffco.

6. What is your position on Tax Credits, ESAs, and Vouchers/Choice Scholarships? Would you support legislation to implement any of these policies in Colorado?

As I have learned from years of experience on boards, we can only control what we can control. Our first responsibility is to be good stewards of the funds we receive. Jeffco’s current budgeting process fails to link activities to costs and results versus critical goals. Jeffco’s overhead costs have been rising, even as student enrollment drops, and achievement results decline. Every year, Jeffco focuses only on allocating incremental revenue, rather than analyzing how efficiently and effectively our \$1.4 billion budget is used to educate our children. I will fight to bring Jeffco’s financial management processes into the 21st century. I will be stewarding taxpayers’ dollars to ensure they are invested in programs that support students and staff.

7. In 2017 five schools were suddenly put on the chopping block for closure, traumatizing those school communities that had primarily more diverse, lower income and higher need students. This past year a school was suddenly closed with no forewarning. In the future, how would you ensure the community is treated with respect in these decisions?

The traumatizing decisions and processes Jeffco Schools Boards have used to close schools is unfair and unjust. Without any guiding principles boards have closed schools for under enrollment, to achieve some perceived savings and because buildings were “in bad shape”. We all know that even the threat of closing a school can cause a decline in enrollment, loss of staff and loss of grant and community support. This is a great example of Jeffco’s Board not stewarding our resources. We also know that in each school closure case, we can find similarly situated Jeffco schools that were not closed. When Allendale was closed without a Board vote, because I sat on the Capital Asset Committee, I had folks reach out panicked that their small Jeffco school might also be closed. Chalkbeat ran an article in their May 28th issue which quoted a Swanson mom shared her concern at the Board’s lack of transparent criteria for closing schools. I would not support closing schools until there has been a set of criteria established and a transparent process for evaluating schools that might be closed. I would also advocate for a review of the schools that have been closed to see if the objective of the closures were met and to attempt to measure the long-term impact on communities of closing the neighborhood school.

8. Reliance on test scores to evaluate schools and teachers seemingly punishes teachers who teach in schools with special centers serving high need students. It also causes enrollment drops in schools serving diverse students. How would you mitigate the over emphasis on test results to evaluate teacher and school performance?

Test results should only be one component of any look at the effectiveness of teachers, schools, or the district. Using student growth at a classroom level would be a far more effective measure of the impact of our teachers than just using achievement scores. Using achievement scores at the school and district level are critical to help Jeffco ensure we are being good stewards of our students' futures. When evaluating the data, the Jeffco Schools Board and community need to be presented the data in context so that good decisions are made about which programs work, and which are not. We also know that many businesses today struggle to hire employees with the adequate skills they need. We must focus on more than just academic achievement and ensure Jeffco students have the opportunity to learn skills that will prepare them for a trade and career not just for college.

9. Jeffco Schools has a visible funding equity issue between newer wealthier schools and older lower income schools? How would you address this issue?

It is critical that every Jeffco student has the opportunity for a great education, obtained in a great facility. We know that the 5B bond funds invested in all high schools to ensure they had equivalent gym and classroom space for science labs and other academic rooms. We also invested in middle schools to both create space for 6th graders and bring facilities up to an adequate level. And even with investing over \$700 million from the capital program in facilities we know some school facilities will be far behind others. The bonds program raised nearly \$100 million in funds that were not anticipated or allocated in the initial materials shared with the community. Rather than have transparent conversations, engaging the community and prioritizing the spending of these funds, the Board has allowed a few staff members to guide the spending of these funds. After all the capital program funds are spent Jeffco schools will still have some facilities that don't meet the high levels of condition we would want for our students. I have the experience necessary to engage the community in these conversations and will steward our resources, so they are invested wisely.

10. K-8 science seems to be overly focused on content, engineering and skills and less about curiosity and method. How will you look at science curriculum in your policy making decisions?

Approving the curriculum is one of the responsibilities of local school boards in Colorado. I have experience on the boards of two schools with very different philosophies on how to provide education to their students but what they both had in common is the knowledge that their students needed to be engaged in their learning. Jeffco Schools is such a large and diverse district that no one curriculum is likely to fit in every school environment. Jeffco is in the process of evaluating literacy curriculum and has so far found there will likely need more than one option. In my policy making I will keep in mind that students need to be engaged in their learning and that whatever

curriculum is selected needs to both teach the “facts” of science as we know them, and instill a curiosity to continue to learn.

11. What are your views on the school safety needs that Jeffco faces?

Jeffco voters approved raising \$567 million in additional funds to invest in facilities. While some of that went to improving the physical safety of our facilities, needs continue to change and we must ensure we are making adequate investments to keep our facilities safe. As a dad of two recent graduates, I also know that safety concerns encompass more than just our school buildings. Calls to the State to Tell tips line during remote learning when students were not in schools were about \$700 per month. We must be investing in systems to prevent cyberbullying as well. And as I have said before as a therapist, I also know we must make the appropriate invests to support good mental health supports. We need to be sure the funds being spent address both the needs of students in crisis and support preventative measures, so we avoid future crises. These investments are a part of being good stewards of our students’ futures.

12. How will you address the issue that Jeffco staffing does not reflect the diversity of the student

body?

Stewarding the future of Jeffco schools requires experienced leaders who have solved complex challenges across multiple organizations. I know hiring has become incredibly regulated with rules that often prohibit asking a candidate’s race in the hiring process. One of the best ways to increase the diversity of our staff is to help our students see themselves as future Jeffco employees. Creating programs that help Jeffco students understand all of the possible career choices in Jeffco schools and helping them see themselves as capable of obtaining positions in Jeffco schools will both increase student engagement and help Jeffco increase the diversity of our staff. We must also be good stewards for our current staff. We must ensure that once hired staff finds connections and a welcoming environment with the supports they need to be successful.

13. What will you do to address the low salaries for teachers and support staff as well as other factors affecting teacher and support staff retention?

As I mentioned above, we must be good stewards for our current staff. We must ensure we are offering competitive compensation and adequately rewarding our amazing staff. Jeffco’s \$1.4 billion dollar budget is now more than 20% higher than it was just a few years ago while enrollment is down 6000 students. Once the pandemic ends and funding per pupil returns to match the number of students Jeffco will lose nearly \$50 million dollars annually because of reduced student enrollment. I have the experience necessary to steward Jeffco’s resources. I have a proven track record of governing

schools and seeing enrollment increase because the boards focused on the right issues, asked tough questions, and help leadership accountable to results. I will do the same as a member of the Jeffco Schools Board.