

Arlington Public Schools Candidates for School Board - Fall 2024

AGIA sent this questionnaire to candidates Kathleen Clark, Zuraya Tapia-Hadley, Vell Rives, and Paul Weiss.

1. Will you support the continued implementation of the existing J-2 PIP-2 (implementing the APS nondiscrimination policy regarding transgender students) regardless of any anti-trans policies enacted by the DOE?

KC: Yes, full stop. I absolutely support the continued implementation of the existing Policy Implementation Procedure J-2 PIP-2 Transgender Students in Schools regardless of any anti-trans policies enacted by the Department of Education. While some of our LGBTQIA+ students are having good experiences in our schools, others are not. There are too many instances of LGBTQIA+ students suffering bullying and harassment in APS schools. This tells me that APS has a problem with the consistent execution of the policy and PIP, and this is completely unacceptable. APS must get to a place where ALL of our students are safe, supported, welcomed, and included in their school environments. Inclusive practices are a top priority for me, and will continue to be as a School Board Member.

ZTH: Yes. In the words of Brené Brown, “The opposite of ‘fitting in’ is belonging,” meaning that we should ensure that our community and society is molded to be accepting and welcoming of individuals’ inherent humanity, not the other way around. Equity and inclusion are at the center of my platform and are part of the reason I am running for School Board. I seek to ensure that *all* children, including our transgender students *and staff* are safe and feel welcome at school.

I believe that we have a responsibility as leaders to work to bring cohesion and understanding to build a stronger APS community, as opposed to sowing division. We have to fight against divisive forces, and I hope to do so in order to facilitate the implementation of J-2 PIP-2.

VR: Inclusion is one of the core values of APS, and I believe the most important application of inclusion is supporting every student and nurturing them in their education. I want every student to be welcomed and treated with respect and kindness, and every staff member, too. Arlington’s J-2 PIP-2 furthers this goal in several ways that align with current Virginia Department of Education (DOE) policy: Staff must take prompt and effective steps to prevent and respond to harassment and bullying of any kind [no exceptions]; single-user, gender-neutral facilities shall be made available to all; and any student uncomfortable sharing sex-segregated facilities or accommodations shall be provided a safe, non-stigmatizing alternative. The DOE guidelines frequently defer to legal precedent and the Constitution, so right now, there is only one area where I find the current APS J-2 PIP-2 in contradiction with the DOE (see question 3). With state guidelines like these, it is often unclear how legally binding the provisions are upon a local entity like APS. That said, I believe APS should comply with local, Federal, and Virginia law and any executive orders that carry the full force of the law, without regard to which party is in power in Richmond or Washington.

PW: Absolutely. I stand firmly behind the continued implementation of the J-2 PIP-2 policy. As an engaged educator, I actively follow current trends in practice and base my responses on up-to-date

research to ensure all students feel safe and supported. Transgender students, like all students, deserve an affirming and inclusive school environment. Research from the American Psychological Association (APA) shows that affirming students' gender identity and creating supportive spaces positively impacts their mental health, well-being, and academic success. This is why it's critical to maintain policies like J-2 PIP-2, regardless of any anti-trans policies enacted elsewhere. Schools must prioritize the rights and dignity of all students, and I will work to ensure this policy continues to be implemented with integrity.

2. The PIP protects students but not staff. How will you protect staff who enforce the PIP when Youngkin's model policies contradict the PIP and potentially open staff up to disciplinary action/lawsuits for affirming students?

KC: As a School Board Member, I will work to ensure that staff who follow the PIP are protected for doing their job. I will work with the Superintendent and APS staff, including our legal counsel, to ensure APS puts all necessary support and protections in place for our staff. For example, the School Board could adopt specific policies that affirm school staff's role in supporting transgender students. Bottom line - The adults in our schools are charged by our community to protect our students; this means that the community, including the School Board, must protect those adults.

ZTH: The APS administration has started conducting implicit bias training and that, as I understand, has been helpful to educators and staff in demonstrating how to work with transgender students and colleagues. I firmly believe we should continue and expand these efforts.

For several years, as part of my daily work, I partnered with organizations like PFLAG, The Trevor Project, GLAAD, and the Human Rights Campaign to connect their expertise and insights to real world reviews of content to combat misinformation and hate speech on social media about the transgender community.

As a School Board member I would not be directly responsible for implementing the PIP, however I would provide vision, guidance, and oversight to the administration on this and many policy issues. I would work closely with APS staff, the superintendent (who has been a staunch advocate to safeguard the PIP policies), and legal counsel in order to provide additional materials and guidance to school administrators such that they feel prepared and safe to discuss and enforce the PIP. Additionally, I would work to make sure that staff have the legal safeguards, taking FERPA into consideration, to be supportive of transgender students.

VR: I will support all APS staff who are making an effort to act in students' best interests and comply with laws and APS policies, and APS should defend staff against legal actions arising from the ordinary performance of their duties. However, APS must not place its teachers and staff in the untenable position of having to choose between APS policy and Virginia DOE policy or state laws. This situation can be remedied (see question 3).

PW: Protecting our staff who affirm and support students' identities is critical. I would advocate for policies that explicitly protect staff members, ensuring they do not face retaliation for upholding APS values of inclusion and nondiscrimination. We must work closely with legal teams to ensure our staff

have clear guidelines and protections in place. I would also collaborate with community advocates and the Arlington County Board to reinforce that any punitive action against staff for affirming students violates both the spirit and legal standing of nondiscrimination laws. We will stand as a united community in protecting all who affirm student identities, ensuring that staff are equipped with support networks and legal resources to defend their actions.

3. What, if any, changes or enhancements would you make to this PIP? Why?

KC: As a point of clarification, School Board Members enact policies via a vote, while the Superintendent and staff are responsible for PIPs that implement the policies. As a School Board Member, I commit to keeping ALL students safe, and therefore would not make any changes to any policy that would weaken APS's existing support and protections for transgender students, including Policy J-2 Student Equal Educational Opportunities/Nondiscrimination. We want our students to feel safe and included!

I am also committed to engaging with our transgender community, including AGIA, to learn directly about opportunities for changes or enhancements within our policy and PIP to better support our transgender students. For example, I know that a sense of belonging is directly connected to our transgender students' sense of well-being, but that is not in the Policy or PIP. I'd like to explore with AGIA how we can modify the Policy and/or the PIP to better address belonging and well-being. APS also has work to do to ensure that both the Policy and PIP are followed consistently in all schools and that all staff are properly trained. The language in the PIP regarding training for staff on topics relating to transgender students may need to be strengthened because all students have the right to feel safe and included.

ZTH: The PIP is a welcome change and has helped many members of the trans community in our schools and I believe it has been a success. However, the PIP only covers students, not transgender staff. I would work closely with the teacher, staff and student alliance as I understand that they are exploring how to put forth a proposed PIP for staff. If elected, I would ask about additional privacy and preemptive support that could be provided to students. I would also inquire into the training and community-building work that can be done to build greater awareness and respect across schools in order to avoid instances of discrimination, bullying, or other abuse.

VR: I support revising the J-2 PIP-2 to specify that a student's sex (not gender identity) is the determinant for appropriate participation in girls' or boys' school athletics. This is the only point where I find explicit contradiction between Arlington's current PIP and the Virginia DOE guidelines. I support enhancing the current PIP by clarifying that written permission shall be obtained from a minor's parent in order for staff to change the name and/or pronouns they use to address their child at school. This is because affirming a child's change of identity is a major intervention, and if staff are not working with a child's family, then they don't have the context and information they need. As additional clarification for teachers, the PIP should reference the general First Amendment protections against compelled speech.

PW: I would focus on expanding the PIP to include more explicit protections for staff, ensuring that they are shielded from legal challenges and disciplinary actions when they affirm students' identities. Furthermore, enhancing mental health resources specifically for LGBTQ+ students is crucial. Research from the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) highlights that inclusive policies combined with strong mental health support drastically reduce risks of bullying and improve mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ students. I'd also push for more robust implementation measures, such as ensuring consistent enforcement of the policy across all APS schools.

4. Across the U.S., legislative actions against trans youth have been widespread. How will you work with the Arlington County Board and other local elected officials to protect the health and safety of our transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students and staff in the face of possible future laws targeting trans people?

KC: First and foremost, I will lead by example as an engaged ally within APS because everyone has the right to feel safe and included. In addition, I commit to:

- **Advocacy and Education:** Work with county government and other local officials to advocate for inclusive policies that protect the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive individuals. This may involve providing education on transgender issues, sharing personal stories from affected individuals, and highlighting the importance of creating safe and inclusive environments for all students and staff.
- **Policy Development:** Collaborate with county government and other local officials to continue to refine APS policies that explicitly protect the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students and staff.
- **Community Engagement:** Engage with the community to raise awareness about the importance of inclusion and supporting transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive individuals. This may include hosting events, participating in community forums, and collaborating with local LGBTQ+ organizations to promote inclusion, understanding and acceptance.
- **Emergency Response Planning:** Develop emergency response plans in collaboration with county government and other local officials to address potential threats to the safety of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students and staff. This may include protocols for responding to incidents of harassment or violence, as well as strategies for providing support and protection during times of crisis.
- **Media Outreach:** Work with county government and other local officials to communicate the importance of protecting the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive individuals to the media. This may involve issuing joint statements, participating in interviews, and leveraging media platforms to raise awareness and counter misinformation.

By building partnerships and fostering open communication, the school board can support a united front within Arlington in support of transgender-inclusive policies and practices.

ZTH: I am committed to helping students, educators and staff feel safe in school. Kids cannot learn if they do not feel comfortable and welcome. I intend to lead by example and ask the hard questions. The adults within the school building are safe space trained, but how can we better equip the adults outside of the building? In my years as an advocate, I have learned that storytelling and telling more inclusive history helps shape perspective, so I would support proposals to highlight stories of more transgender figures from our history and in world news. I believe such stories help diminish biases and make students feel comfortable speaking to educators and staff. We have to be forceful against the very real anti-trans rhetoric and actions rising across the U.S., and more broadly.

I would defend the rights of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students to access healthcare and appropriate counseling, and guard against moves like the recent [Cass Report](#) in the UK. The report reviewed the state of gender-affirming care for youth by the NHS discouraged gender-affirming care and counseling, advancing a view to treat young people with gender dysphoria. Such a proposal could significantly harm the mental health of young people and, as evidenced by comments in response to it, has the additional harmful consequence of seemingly making it permissible for people to be justified in anti-trans rhetoric, behavior, and legislation.

I would work to engage with Arlington County Board members, APS, and County staff to ensure that students are aware of all the resources available to them and ensure that counseling in our schools continues to follow best practices.

VR: We should start within APS: Every student and staff member is entitled to attend school and work in an environment free from discrimination and harassment. As an aspiring School Board member, I think all students and staff could be better protected if APS had more effective anti-bullying practices. When any student or staff is bullied, harassed, intimidated, or disrespected for any reason (again, no exceptions), there should be negative consequences applied to the offender.

I appreciate APS's increasing emphasis on interpersonal restoration, but that alone is not sufficient. Developmentally appropriate, proportional consequences are needed to discourage problem behaviors. If we truly have zero tolerance for harassment and bullying, then APS will be a safe and welcoming place for all despite the (often changing) legal and political climate on the outside. I support funding for our County Board's and School Board's Departments of Intergovernmental and Legislative Affairs respectively, who advocate for our students, staff, and families as specific needs and opportunities arise. If elected I would be interested in serving as the School Board liaison to their review teams.

PW: I will collaborate closely with the Arlington County Board and local elected officials to create a unified front against harmful legislation. This involves ensuring that local protections for transgender and nonbinary individuals remain strong and cannot be overridden by state or federal policies. I would advocate for local laws that secure access to gender-affirming healthcare, mental health services, and educational protections. Additionally, I will work to build partnerships with advocacy organizations like GLSEN and local LGBTQ+ rights groups to provide our students and staff with the resources and support they need to thrive. By maintaining an open line of communication with both elected officials and

community stakeholders, we can ensure that our transgender students and staff feel safe and valued within APS.

5. This year APS held training for PE teachers on working with transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students. As a school board member, how will you ensure that all teachers, substitutes, and staff have high-quality training to respond appropriately to the needs of this population of students, to questions from students about gender identity, and to incidents of gender-related harassment or bullying?

KC: Holding training for PE teachers is just a start. ALL of our teachers and staff, including substitutes, must receive mandatory training so they are prepared to respond appropriately to the needs of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students. I think it is important for educators and staff to understand their responsibility for ensuring safety and fostering a sense of belonging and well-being.

In addition, we need to ensure that teachers and staff understand the critical importance of confidentiality and privacy of our transgender students and be trained on how to handle sensitive information about a student's gender identity. In particular, our school-based mental health staff (e.g., counselors, social workers) need additional training about responding to students' questions about gender-identity, and school administrators need additional training to appropriately address gender-related bullying and harassment.

ZTH: I support the Trans Youth Equality Foundation's statement that "a safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environment for everyone is essential for the mental and physical wellbeing of trans, non-binary, and gender expansive students. I fully support continuing training for PE teachers and expanding it to include classroom teachers and administrators. In addition to training we must commit to working with parents, students, educators, & staff to build a culture of inclusivity that ensures that our schools are a safe and positive environment.

Additionally, I would like to work with APS staff to improve the way we survey students and staff and improve reporting specifically on issues impacting trans, non-binary, and gender expansive students. The feedback I have received from friends in the community is that it's important to design the surveys better, with identity based bucket questions that are broad enough such that they do not specifically identify students, but still allow for students to provide feedback on their own specific needs and experiences.

For example, instead of reporting out, "X% of students feel welcome and included in schools," shaping questionnaires such that we can learn, of all trans, non-binary, and gender expansive students, do most of them feel safe in school? How many suffer or have suffered bullying or worse? It is important to balance getting more accurate feedback from the community with respecting individuals' privacy.

I have also received feedback that some of the SEL curriculum in schools has helped. As we make gender issues part of the dialogue when we discuss hurtful behavior and how words and actions impact members of the community, we help make our children more mindful and caring. I hope to be an influence to do the same with adults. We should continue to build on the training that has already begun by the administration and host convenings with parents and families. We must build real human connection to overcome the

fear and biases that threaten our trans, non-binary, and gender expansive students and staff. In that vein, I would like to explore how we can build spaces and convenings that help families of trans students to build networks that enhance support for them and for their students.

VR: The School Board and administration should fund and facilitate continuing education and timely training for staff. While meeting licensure requirements, I support giving our teachers some individual choice about which professional development most interests them or best addresses their own weaknesses. For training on how best to support minority or marginalized groups, I favor a sensitivity approach rather than a competency approach. For example, cultural competency proves impossible in such a wonderfully diverse place as Arlington, where no one could ever master all of the traditions, idioms, and social nuances of the cultures represented here. But one can be culturally sensitive to the presence of differences, and aware that one's own background and conventions are not universally shared. A culturally sensitive mindset fosters empathy and learning and maybe even friendship. The same approach can apply to the varied personal identities we encounter; the combinations and intersections are limitless - competency across the spectrum is impossible. But staff can teach and model sensitivity and respect for everyone, always, no matter what. So I think the most effective regular training will emphasize preventing and responding to harassment and bullying, along with the underlying premise that everyone deserves to be welcomed, respected, and treated with kindness.

PW: Comprehensive and continuous training for all staff members is essential. As a school board member, I would advocate for mandatory, ongoing training programs for all teachers, substitutes, and staff. These trainings would focus on addressing gender identity, responding to questions about gender in an informed and compassionate way, and effectively intervening in cases of gender-related bullying. GLSEN's research shows that schools with well-trained staff experience fewer instances of bullying and higher levels of student well-being. I would also push for the integration of gender-inclusive curricula, ensuring that all students, regardless of their identity, see themselves represented in their education. In partnership with LGBTQ+ organizations, we can provide the necessary tools to create safe, affirming spaces for all students.

By standing firm in our values of inclusivity and respect, we can ensure APS continues to be a safe, empowering space for our LGBTQ+ youth and staff, even in the face of external pressures.