

Taral Mehta responses

Candidate for Fort McMurray Public School Trustee

Curriculum:

Curriculum experts, educators, parents, and many of the current school boards have pointed out the flaws in the draft k-6 curriculum.

- 1. Do you agree with calls to scrap the draft curriculum and start over to develop a curriculum that is accurate in capturing Alberta's colonial history, diverse present, and modernized to reflect the world we live in?**
 - The curriculum is not sufficient enough for our students. Our educators and the public should have been given more access from the beginning. Due to the curriculum's lack of knowledge, diversity, and lack of input from the public, I believe that scrapping the curriculum would be a smarter move. By redrafting the curriculum and allowing everyone to have a say in it, we can make sure our education system is adequate for our students, staff, and the parents.

Funding:

Alberta continues to be a growing province, with more students entering the system. While we're told funding is tight for public education, Alberta continues to subsidize private education with millions in public dollars.

- 2. Do you believe the current education funding formula is sufficient for your district? If not, how will you work to convince the province to provide sustainable and adequate funding?**

- When the 2020-2021 school year had started, Alberta had increased the school budget from \$8.32 billion to \$8.34 billion. Yes, this is a slight bump up. However, last year's rules were much stricter. With much more province wide masking and a great deal of needed hand sanitizer, Twenty thousand was an insufficient bump in budget. This bump in cost is only a 0.7% increase. This year, they have stated that they have maintained the budget by keeping it at \$8.2 billion.

Our budget isn't sufficient enough for our district. The budget lacks in many areas however with our community facing the 2016 Wildfires, Covid-19 Pandemic, and then the 2020 floods, we need more funding targeted to mental/physical health programs. If we want to convince the government we must all come together and call on the government. If everyone comes together and tells them that we need better funding then from there we can begin to discuss with them. Keeping strong and good relations with the government where both our board and government accomplish what we need is crucial.

Privatization including P3s:

AUPE members know very well that privatization regularly fails to find "efficiencies" and any cost savings are often off the backs of workers who become de-unionized, with lower pay and benefits. They also work on the front lines of service delivery and see the problems caused by high-turnover low-wage private providers, and the bureaucratic burden caused by having to deal with a third party instead of an in-house provider.

- 3. Will you oppose privatization of school services and infrastructure, including Public-Private-Partnerships aka P3s? Will you support bringing previously privatized services in-house?**
 - I believe that having Public-Private Partnerships in place would be helpful as it would allow stronger relations to form with outside companies. I believe having a mix of both public and private would be completely fine. However, I believe that having strictly only privatized services within the system would hinder our staff and overall board.

Schools as Employers:

As our economies recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, good jobs are an important factor. Public sector workers spend in their communities, and many households impacted by private sector recessions have been able to keep the bills paid thanks to a stable public sector job.

4. Will you support your employees and your community by ensuring the school board employs staff with living wages, full-time hours where desired, job security, and collective bargaining rights?

- I'd 100% fully support all our employees and community members. The past few years have been quite tough on our entire community from fires to floods and the pandemic. Everyone's family situation is different and it is important that everyone can pay their bills and make sure they have fair working hours. This allows them to work enough to support themselves and their families, as well as making sure they have enough time off. Furthermore, whenever anyone goes to work they want to feel secure. We want to make sure our employees enjoy their work and if they feel they are being treated unfairly then they can easily come to us. Lastly, if they do come to us we would want them to be able to feel like their jobs aren't rigid and that they can bargain without worrying that their job will be lost.

5. Will you oppose attempts from the provincial government to legislate against school staff including cuts to the Local Authorities Pension Plan or restrictions on their right to strike?

- We will definitely oppose attempts from the government for such matters. Our employee's voices matter just as much as other people within our community. Within the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, we have the right to go on peaceful public strikes. Secondly, our employees have already faced many budget cuts. However, all our staff has actually increased their workload, especially within the past two years. Our staff employees deal with enough hardships and as a trustee, I believe we must stand up for them.

COVID Safety:

With the negligent provincial response to now three preventable waves of COVID-19, school boards have been put in an awkward position of needing to take measures to protect their students and staff throughout the pandemic. Many are introducing measures of their own, but not all have.

6. Do you support measures such as mask mandates, and vaccine mandates for staff to limit and reduce the spread of COVID-19 in your schools?

- I believe that the vaccine is based on personal choice. I can't force anything upon anyone else. This is totally up to the individual. Personally, my entire family has been vaccinated. Specifically in schools, I think that we should try to keep up with our clean habits. Meaning we should keep up with hand sanitizing, wiping down surfaces, and trying to social distance when possible. However, I would strongly recommend wearing masks to students who can wear them to try to curb the spread and make people feel safer. Also, our younger children who do not have the vaccine can feel more protected. I'd recommend that children between the age of Kindergarten and Grade 3 can wear masks when possible. However, they shouldn't have to be forced as they are on the younger side. Overall, when it comes to students it's up to what their parents/legal guardians decide. When talking about staff, once again I'd say it's a personal choice.