

Good evening:

Taxpayers for Public Education (TFPE) is a Colorado based non-partisan 501(c)(4) organization. The mission of TFPE is to support and advocate for public education. TFPE does not endorse candidates or political campaigns. We are asking all Douglas County School Board candidates to answer the following survey. Your responses will be placed on the Taxpayer For Public Education website as well as our Facebook page.

Please list your website, Facebook page name, twitter account, email address or any other means that a voter can contact you.



Susan Meek for Douglas County School Board

9249 S. Broadway, #200-386, Highlands Ranch, CO 80129

Phone: 720.971.9830

Email: susanmeek4dcschools@gmail.com

Web: <https://sites.google.com/site/susanmeek4douglascountyschools/>

Twitter: @SusanDMeek

Facebook: Susan Meek for Douglas County School Board

Please state your views on the following:

1. What is your vision for Douglas County School District?

Douglas County School District has long been considered a leader in education – in fact, it has been considered a “destination” school district due to its reputation for innovative programs and excellent educators. However, many parents and citizens have expressed concern that we have lost focus and I would agree. My

vision is to return the focus on what matters most – educating and preparing our students with a world-class education. In order to do so, we must stabilize the organization, promote a leadership style that connects to our stakeholders and remove the politics from the Board of Education.

The organization is currently hemorrhaging due to funding issues, low employee morale and a lack of trust from District stakeholders. Addressing these concerns needs to be a top priority. To begin this process, a leadership style that inspires employees and the community must be adopted in order to continue our long tradition of innovative and creative programs. And lastly, we need to remove the politics from the Board of Education. I do not believe special interest groups and political parties should endorse candidates. Board members need to be free to make decisions based on the best interest of school children and the community – not based on a political platform or agenda. Once endorsements are made, pressure is exerted on those candidates to promote a particular agenda. In summary, we need to return our focus on providing a world-class education to students.

2. What is your view on the Douglas County School District Bond/Mill question (3A 3B)?

I support the mill levy and bond questions (3A and 3B) on the 2011 ballot. In my opinion, school board members are responsible for determining whether there is a true need on the District's part, whether the administration has created a viable plan for how the funds would be expended, and whether the local community would be supportive of such a measure.

- 1) As to whether there is a need, class sizes are at levels where parents are expressing true concern and parents may choose to leave the school district if they are not satisfied with their options. In addition, I believe in fairly compensating hard working employees who have had their wages frozen for the past several years. As in any market economy, those employees have the ability to leave a school district that does not adequately compensate them for their work. Lastly, the District needs to pass the mill levy just to cover current and anticipated budget reductions due to reduced per pupil funding from the state.
- 2) As to whether there is a well-articulated plan for how the mill levy revenues will be used to address the financial needs, I am less confident. I would like to see more substantial details around exactly how the money will be spent and allocated. Additionally, the District has not calculated into its budget how it will account for the anticipated \$16 million less in revenue from the state in 2012-13 school year. This lack of planning is short-sighted and irresponsible.
- 3) As to whether the community would be supportive of such a measure, I believe there is enough evidence that the community would be supportive based on the following data:

- The favorability rating for a \$20 million mill levy has increased from 50% to 56% over the past year according to the two polls that were conducted in May 2010 and in April 2011. Polls and surveys can be found on my website at <http://www.tinyurl.com/425h3dh>.
- In 2010, the poll found that people equally weighted two concerns - 1) improving K-12 education and 2) strengthening Douglas County's economy and protecting jobs. In 2011, the poll found that the top priority to be improving the quality of public education and it rated 14 percentage points above improving the economy and creating jobs. This rise in concern around improving public education is significant.
- Recent parent and staff surveys have shown significant drops in the response to "the District is headed in the right direction." Survey data for 2010-11 school year is not available. However, the 2009-2010 surveys found a 9-point drop for parents and 15-point drop for employees.

The average homeowner is estimated to experience an initial annual tax increase of \$45 due to the proposed mill and bond measure. However, there are many factors that come into play as to what the actual impact would be on a homeowner. In order to be as transparent as possible, I've created a tax calculator so that anyone who wants to calculate their own impact can do so and can make an informed decision based on their own assessed home value. My website has this calculator.

Taking into account the above information, I believe it is the appropriate time to allow citizens the opportunity to vote on whether they are supportive of this investment in public schools at this time.

If 3A, the mill levy, does not pass, I believe Douglas County School District will be forced to cut \$27.7 million from its 2012-13 school year budget to address current and anticipated budget cuts. Unfortunately, this level of detail has not been provided to the public and if 3A does not pass, the public will not understand why these reductions will need to be made.

School Year	Reductions Due to State Revenue Shortfall and Increases in Costs
2009-10	\$ 9 million mid-year rescission
2010-11	\$26 million
2011-12	\$21.7 million (\$11.7 million still to be cut in 2012-13*)
2012-13 (Projected)	\$16 million* (\$11.7 million from 2011-12)

****\$27.7 million will likely need to be cut in 2012-2013 if 3A does not pass***

3. What is your view on Prop 103?

Proposition 103 creates a five-year timeout from education cuts by raising around \$3 billion over five years for preschool, K-12 education and higher education. Sales tax would go from 2.9% to 3% and the personal and corporate income tax will go from 4.63% to 5%.

We live in a state that requires a taxpayer vote in order to raise taxes (TABOR). The decision to support Proposition 103 is a personal one that each voter will have the opportunity to weigh in on. As a Board member of Douglas County School Board, I would have no decision-making authority around Proposition 103 also known as the Bright Proposal. Obviously, school funding is receiving much attention and the current funding system does not seem to be a sustainable one.

The chart at the end of question #2 provides an overview of state related budget reductions that DCSD has had to make over the past several years. The numbers are significant and demonstrate that there is a new normal in funding for public schools.

If elected, I would like to create a task force consisting of educators and non-educators who would work together to explore alternative funding means that could result in a revolutionary transformation of education where efficiencies are created while effectiveness is improved.

4. Do you believe that Douglas County School District is equitably funded at the state level?

According to the Colorado Constitution, the state must provide a thorough and uniform education for all public school students. The Public School Finance Act of 1994 uses a formula to determine state and local funding amounts for the state's 178 school districts and the Charter School Institute (see Understanding Colorado School Finance and Categorical Program Funding, July 2011).

Whether schools are funded adequately and equitably is under much debate at this time. The Lobato Case has asked the court to determine the school finance system as unconstitutional. Current DCSD Board of Education members have made public comments that our public school finance system is flawed.

I believe it is the right time to revisit how public schools are funded in Colorado, whether the mandates and accountability measures placed on public schools are funded adequately, and whether a new funding model is appropriate.

The following table provides a snapshot of several local school districts' per pupil funding allocation and displays the amount of funding collected from three funding streams (local personal property taxes, local specific ownership taxes, and the state share):

DISTRICT	FY2011-12 ESTIMATED FUNDED PUPILS	TOTAL PROGRAM FUNDING - AFTER STATE BUDGET STABILIZATION FACTOR	PROPERTY TAX REVENUES	PROPERTY TAX REVENUES/STUDENT	SPECIFIC OWNERSHIP TAX	SPECIFIC OWNERSHIP TAX/STUDENT	STATE SHARE	STATE SHARE/STUDENT	PER PUPIL FUNDING
CHERRY CREEK	49,395.82	319,594,439.44	121,380,013.09	2,457.29	8,740,620.45	176.95	189,473,805.90	3,835.83	6,470.07
LITTLETON	15,054.61	94,719,241.91	33,721,107.52	2,239.92	2,413,868.65	160.34	58,584,265.74	3,891.45	6,291.71
BOULDER	28,148.81	181,439,340.16	121,748,508.12	4,325.17	6,184,589.68	219.71	53,506,242.36	1,900.84	6,445.72
DENVER	72,770.09	505,085,547.14	285,169,021.60	3,918.77	17,375,124.05	238.77	202,541,401.49	2,783.31	6,940.84
DOUGLAS	57,945.84	363,764,269.33	125,871,582.78	2,172.23	8,743,382.71	150.89	229,149,303.84	3,954.54	6,277.66
JEFFERSON	81,191.82	517,160,228.60	191,890,324.87	2,363.42	13,762,248.97	169.50	311,507,654.76	3,836.69	6,369.61

The yellow columns provide the per student allocation for each of the three funding streams to help compare across districts. As stated in CDE's Understanding Colorado School Finance and Categorical Program Funding, each District keeps all of its local funding. The state share makes up the difference so that each school district can meet the Per Pupil Funding amount.

5. What is your view on vouchers in Douglas County School District? One criticism of the voucher program is that the standards of private schools are different than those of public schools. If the Choice Scholarship Program should prevail in court, do you believe that schools that accept taxpayer dollars should have to comply with the same standards as our public schools? For example, should participating private schools be able to discriminate based on race, sex, religion, disability or sexual orientation?

I do not support the current Choice Scholarship Program (or vouchers). This program has been a huge distraction to Douglas County School District, demonstrates irresponsible fiscal and business decision-making, and resulted in a lack of transparency and accountability. Public trust continues to erode due to the way the vouchers were developed, approved and implemented.

The irresponsible decisions include:

- Using General Fund money to send parents tuition check money without knowing the state will actually fund those students (over \$300,000 in funds). Court testimony disclosed the district originally intended to begin distributing scholarships in September, but instead began issuing checks around the beginning of July.
- Moving forward with vouchers knowing 100% that the District would be sued and having no money in the bank to address the legal costs (\$330,000 in legal costs incurred so far and with the Board continuing to fight the legal battle, the legal costs will increase significantly).
- Creating a Choice Scholarship School as a charter school in order to administer the scholarship program. This charter school does not meet the same charter school standards expected of all of the charter schools in DCSD. The formation of a choice charter school -- which has no building, no staff or teachers, but acts as an administrator for the state-issued school funding -- was created in the image of a charter school and is likely to hurt the image of true charter schools.

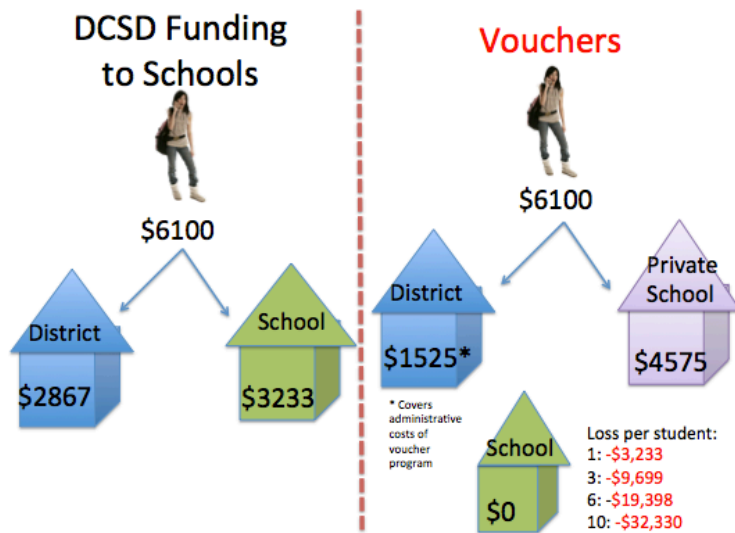
The lack of accountability and transparency include:

- Having public meetings indicating that there would be Conditions of

Eligibility that private schools must meet to become a Private Partner School and then changing those conditions.

- Not requiring financial transparency of taxpayer dollars from the Private Partner Schools.
- Private Partner Schools do not require teacher licensure requirements and background checks required by Public Schools.
- An accountability plan has not been made public and is not available for review. This is essential since the District is responsible for the taxpayer money entrusted to it.

If public dollars are being used to support public education, the same rules of engagement should be in place to use those public funds. The following 2 charts indicate funding realities for vouchers and the negative impact on public schools and it also addresses examples of how the playing field is not equal.



Level Playing Field?



"We want a level playing field that doesn't subsidize or favor any choice, but lets parents evaluate options on the merits and make the best selection for their children."

"The Board must provide an overarching vision for the District and ensure that choice (and its corollary, competition) takes place as part of a process marked by integrity, transparency, fairness, and even-handedness."

– Craig Richardson

Public Schools

- Open to all children, of all abilities, at all times
- State funding not guaranteed
- Limited funding source
- Financial transparency
- Teachers must have background checks and licensure requirements

Private Partner Schools

- Admission process allows discrimination
- Requires student tuition
- Can charge any tuition
- No financial transparency
- No requirements for teacher background checks nor licensure

6. What is your vision on meeting the needs of special education students?

My vision for meeting the needs of special education students includes having the funds associated with educating special education students follow the students. Through the federal law, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, states are required to provide special education consistent with federal standards in order to qualify for federal funds. Public schools play a critical role in providing a free and appropriate public education to all students, including special education students. Unlike other educational choices, public schools cannot discriminate against special education students. As a Board member, I would work to ensure that funds are allocated in a manner that best supports a student's learning needs.

According to the DCSD Financial Plan and Budget:

Special education programming is driven by the unique individual educational needs of students with disabilities and procedures required by federal and state mandates. On average, in Douglas County Schools, the cost of special education is 2 to 2.5 times the amount spent on students without disabilities. Approximately ten percent of special education funding comes from the federal government and sixteen percent provided via the state. The balance of approximately seventy-four percent is derived from local District sources.

The special education population is very diverse. It includes students who are categorized as cognitively disabled, learning disabled, emotionally disturbed, visually impaired, hearing impaired, physically disabled, speech/language impaired, chronically ill, or multiply disabled. The vast majority of special education students is in the mainstream, attending neighborhood schools, and spends at least part of the day in a general education classroom.

The schools undertake the responsibility of: (1) identifying all disabled children and offering them educational services; (2) assessing each disabled child individually and, when appropriate, formulating a written Individualized Education Program (IEP); (3) ensuring that disabled students are placed in the "least restrictive environment" commensurate with their needs; (4) notifying parents in writing about identification, evaluation and school placement of their child; and (5) providing those "related services" required for children to benefit from special education.

7. What is your vision on retaining and recruiting highly qualified teachers?

Teachers are the backbone of any educational system. Douglas County has traditionally been very successful recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers while paying them comparable wages to other local school districts. However, with pay wages frozen over the past several years, Douglas County is no longer competitive in its wages and falls at the bottom of this pay-range. In question #1, I indicated that we need to stabilize the organization – one key

factor to stabilizing the organization is determining how to address our lack of competitiveness with other school districts that will continue to recruit our most qualified teachers.

I support having a Pay for Performance plan for the school district where a teacher's pay (and all school district employees' pay) is tied to the achievement of specific goals set for those employees. Unfortunately, the new plan is long on rhetoric and short on details. I would like to see an implementation plan and time frame for the creation of this program. When asked, I was told the new plan will take years to put in place and there is no plan to address salaries over the next few years. I understand this is a complex undertaking and that to do it well requires the development of a wide-body of learning assessments at all levels and the technological platform to be able to accurately and effectively determine what performance is to be compensated and at what level. At the same time, it is important to understand that the teachers have had their wages frozen over the past three years as the District has cut budgets and increased class sizes. The following stats were taken from CDE's website:

CDE Pupil Membership and Classroom Teacher Data				
District	Pupil Count	# of Teachers	Average Teacher Salary	Pupil/Teacher Ratio
Jefferson County	85979	4869.3	\$55,116.00	17.7
Denver	78339	4681.4	\$49,432.00	16.7
Douglas County	61465	2949.3	\$52,805.00	20.8
Cherry Creek	52232	2962	\$61,590.00	17.6
Boulder	29526	1687.6	\$58,123.00	17.5
Littleton	15733	831.6	\$57,085.00	18.9

In addition, Superintendent Fagen also stated that in a recent salary comparison, DCSD teachers are below their counterparts. If we cannot pay a competitive wage to teachers, the best teachers will leave, regardless of the promise of a new performance pay plan. I believe we will see families leaving as well if the best teachers leave and if class sizes are not stabilized.

If the mill levy passes and if there is not a shortfall due to more budget reductions from the state, my proposed solution for the short-term would be to provide a fair wage increase to teachers while the performance pay system is created. It is unrealistic to believe employees should have their wages frozen for five or more years, while class sizes increase and their benefits decrease. They will go to where the market will pay them for their talent and the quality of DCSD schools will decline resulting in a negative effect on our students, schools and community.

8. What should be the role of political parties in school board elections? Have you accepted the endorsement of a political party, or any other organization? Have you accepted funds from any source other than private citizens?

I have purposefully not sought endorsements from political parties or special interest groups. I have included testimonials on my website which provide the voters with better character references than endorsements typically provide. As school board races are nonpartisan, I do not believe special interest groups and political parties should endorse candidates nor should they promote candidates using the resources they have available to them. I have not accepted funds from any source other than private citizens.

Board members need to be free to make decisions based on the best interest of school children and not based on a political platform or agenda. Once endorsements are made from special interest groups or political parties, pressure is exerted on those who received the endorsement to move forward with a particular agenda. Examples of partisan pressure being placed on school board members concerning their school board votes were recently witnessed prior to the vote on 3A and 3B.

9. The Choice Scholarship program was found unconstitutional in a recent court decision. School board members take an oath to uphold the Colorado Constitution. As a member of the school board how will you deal with the conflict of the BOE continuing to support and defend the Choice Scholarship Program?

If elected to the DCSD School Board, I would work toward improving the level of transparency so that Board conversations related to this topic are held publicly and only during public meetings, ensure that citizens who care enough to sign up for public comment are treated respectfully, oppose diverting any public funds and resources to support this program, and ask for a public accounting of the DCSD employees' time and resources already directed toward this program.

As I have stated repeatedly, the voucher program has been a huge distraction and we need to return our focus on what matters most – educating our students.

Submitted by Susan D. Meek
Candidate for District A seat on the
DCSD Board of Education
October 2, 2011