



Jeffco School Board Candidate Responses - GT Questionnaire October 2021

For every school board election, JAGC sends questions relevant to gifted & talented programming to each candidate and requests their responses. Responses to questions are unedited. Thank you to the candidates for responding to our questionnaire.

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Dave Johnson

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

My career began at a private school for twice exceptional students. I ran all Admissions, so worked with families, students, and counselors to best place students for success. My philosophy is that support needs to be equal and on par with all services provided....that includes funding, training, and all resources (staffing) to meet the needs of GT students.

I have a daughter in the GT program and note firsthand the support provided, services rendered, and focus from school and district.

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

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The National Association for Gifted Children has developed national standards for teachers' preparation programs for GT students' education. I believe those professional standard and requirements are basics, Master's degree, specific endorsements, and expertise for specialized programming for GT education. In short, specific, and special certification should designate those who teach and administer GT programming.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

I would work with District to ensure each specified GT program has appropriate, specified classes, co-horts, and teachers to ensure students feel safe to explore their creative and intellectual gifts.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

The GT program does have specific and separate 'department' at District. They do have specified and designated personal to explore, create, and run programming. I do believe the District attempts to recognize GT student's needs. As a Board member I would hold that department accountable for performance. That is the foundation of my platform, Accountability....

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

My main platform is the safety of students, both physical and mental health. My focus is to 'have students IN SCHOOL' at all costs. That is the first step.

As a career mental health professional, I also will stress equal and mandatory resources be put into SELS and appropriate professionals.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

I have always thought GT learners are thought of 'after the fact'. We focus 90% of our time on 10% of the underperformance. Equality is a myth. GT learners represent a significant portion of the student body and should receive the appropriate amount of focus, resources, funding, and professional development.

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Kathy Miks

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

As the mom of three children, I know each child has unique learning needs; in our family one of my sons was identified as gifted. We chose the gifted center for his elementary experience and for middle and high school he was on an ALP at a neighborhood high school. Having followed the evolution of supports for gifted students in Jeffco, I am pleased that there is now an opportunity for identification through more than just one assessment. I know that provides the flexibility to many students whose gifts may not be identified well on one assessment. It is great that all students take the CogAT in 2nd grade, although having my son identified in kindergarten helped him, so I wonder if universal assessment should be done in kindergarten.

I also appreciate that each school has a resource teacher so that teachers and families are well supported whether they decide to send their child to a center program or a neighborhood school on an ALP. I also appreciate that teachers in center programs have a GT certification, that is a new bright spot. For staffing, I would want to be sure that we don't have parents wanting a program they can't have because it isn't staffed, if that were the case, I would support more staffing. I have found the JAGC site and the GT pages on the district's site full of resources and the connection to other parents provides great support to those navigating the needs of gifted students.

My belief on funding is the priority should be to fund the programs that students need to succeed academically and that support the whole child. As a mom I know supporting our son socially and emotionally was just as important as making sure his academic growth was on track.

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

For teachers in center programs, I believe they should have the gifted certification or should be working toward that certification. For schools without a center program, it would be beneficial for there to be at least one teacher in each school to have a gifted certification. I would expect that those at the district level that support gifted programs would also have some sort of gifted certification. For administrators, I would expect those leading schools with GT center programs have an appreciation for the needs of gifted students and would hope the hiring committee would include at least one teacher and parent active in the gifted community. I would also expect that the social emotional learning specialist supporting the schools with center programs has some formal training in the needs of gifted students.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

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Supporting the whole child needs of all of our students is extremely important to me. I had the opportunity to coach volleyball at Columbine for ten years and know that creating an environment in which it is safe to try new things and fail is critical to success. My son experienced this safety net early and as a result blossomed. My husband and I often said we want our children to try hard things and not do well while they still lived at home and had great supports to get through not feeling well about their performance. As a coach I tried to help stretch our players and although it wasn't always comfortable, they always knew they were supported. That is the environment I hope for all gifted students.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

I know from coaching if you only focus on the weaknesses of players, you will never have a winning team. For our 2e students, as with most students, we must ensure we are celebrating their strengths and giving them ample opportunities to grow in their strengths at the same time we are helping to build foundations to lessen their challenges.

I have been told this is one area where Jeffco has room for growth. We know from our CMAS scores that most students on IEPs aren't learning a year's worth of content and far too many are not performing at grade level. We know when gifted students feel there is little chance of success they often don't try. We must find ways to support our 2e students, so they have the same opportunities to succeed.

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

We learned raising our gifted son that he was extremely sensitive to the feelings of others, that changes took him longer to adjust to, and abrupt changes really caused disruptions. We need to ensure that the mental health supports in our buildings are able to both prevent crisis situations and identify when a student is in crisis so they can get the supports the student and family need. For those in crisis those supports may be through the district partnership with Jefferson Center or it may take a referral to another organization. We learned from our son and his friends that gifted children often don't want to admit they want or need help, so being attentive to small changes in behavior is critical. As a board member, to ensure the mental health needs of all students and especially our gifted students, I would advocate that our professionals be able to build meaningful relationships with our students.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

We all know academic achievement scores in Jeffco have been declining for a number of years. As a board member I want to see that trend reversed and want to be sure every child is learning to their potential, that is especially important that our gifted students continue to feel challenged to grow.

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There seems to be a gap with our 2e students so I would want to better understand what is needed to reverse that and make the appropriate investments for that to improve. I also want to make sure we have the appropriate high-level classes and college level opportunities, as well as career exploration opportunities available to ensure we are sparking the intellectual as well as creative spirit for students.

I was active in the Expanding Your Horizons program for many years that allowed girls to explore areas of interest in math and science related careers and help them determine if they wanted to pursue careers in those areas. The program was very successful because it provided women role models for the young women.

I also want to make sure our students have the opportunity to have great mentors. I know when I first worked on the rocket propulsion systems for the space shuttle, I was often the only woman in the room. All students need to know they can accomplish what they want with the right supports. As a board member, I will help ensure students have access to the mentors they need to see themselves as successful happy adults.

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Mary Parker

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

I am the mother of a Gifted and Talented student and also the mother of a student with a learning disability. In my experience the school policies that address these students are good but the implementation of them is not consistent. Elementary School teachers seemed to be better informed about the policies and there were good resources such as SPED teachers. However, by the time my kids got to High School I found that many of their teachers were not even aware of their status.

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

I believe that all administrators should be required to know how many GT and SPED students are in their schools have an ALP or IEP. Teachers should be trained on how best to work with GT and SPED students. Every school should also have an SEL. Administrators, teachers, and SELs should meet regularly to discuss every GT and SPED student's specific needs and Parent/Teacher conferences should happen more regularly for these students.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

Every school should have an SEL who will work with each GT student to determine what type of environment the student feels safest and most comfortable in. Then the SEL should work with the teachers to determine how to integrate this type of environment into their classroom.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

In my personal experience as a parent, my child who was on an IEP was not recognized as being twice-exceptional. She had a wonderful resource teacher in Elementary School who told her during a meeting with the principal, 3rd grade teacher, the resource teacher and myself "Megan, you might be the smartest person in this room. But your brain works differently and it's our job to figure out the best way to teach you to show how smart you are." I appreciated that statement more than you can ever imagine. It gave my daughter the confidence she needed to go forward after it was determined at that meeting that she would repeat the 3rd grade. It was a very difficult time for our family, especially for my daughter, but she went on to succeed in school and ultimately became a SPED teacher herself in Jeffco schools.

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As a parent, I was much more concerned about the training of the educators than I was of the district policies. In my experience, policies are usually well-written and thorough. It is the

implementation of them that counts the most, and that depends on the training and expertise of the educators.

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

All of our students have increased mental health needs due to the pandemic. My daughters who are teachers told me of some students who actually benefited from the independent work they were able to do at home. But for most students, the abrupt changes to their educational routine were very difficult. As a board member, I would push for an increased number of SELs and would direct the district to develop a plan to identify the most at-risk students for mental health needs.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

From my own personal experience, I believe that all educators should be trained on the needs of GT learners and the best practices to meet those needs. Additionally, I think it is very important that principals ensure that GT students are assigned to classrooms whose teachers have demonstrated through experience and/or teaching style to be best suited to meet the needs of GT students. And, as I have stated before, schools need to have SELs available to regularly check in with these students

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Paula Reed

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

As an educator, I had many students over the years with ALP's. I believe it is as important for a teacher to know what is on an ALP and work with it as it is for an IEP (and kids may have both). I do think that young teachers are often left to navigate these on their own, and we can do more to include ALP's in new teacher training. It is also important for students to be able to access programs that allow them to develop their individual gifts and talents. As I'm sure you know, a child who is gifted in one area may not be gifted in another, and their gifts may not lie in traditional academic areas, so all disciplines need courses that allow kids to accelerate, not just excel. The board must support creative curriculum as well as academic.

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

First, all the educators in gifted students' lives have to understand that students who are intellectually quite mature may be right on par or even behind their peers, as these develop at different rates. It's also possible that this part of their development is also accelerated, and gifted students may feel more comfortable with adults than peers. Educators need to adjust their interactions with students accordingly. Across the board, schools need SEL support for all kids. Children often need help understanding all the ways their differences from each other make their community stronger. Neurotypicality among all members of a community is not desirable, as out-of-the-box thinking benefits everyone.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

A learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for every student. These things should be fostered as an inherent part of the culture in every school, and as a board member and former educator who took pride in this culture in her own classroom, I would set that expectation. The fact that I needed to adjust my instruction and approach for individual differences in how children process has helped me in all my dealings in life. It taught me that we do not have to think alike--not just that we don't have to think the same things; we don't have to think the same way. Thinking in different ways creates innovation. This should be valued and celebrated.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

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It's possible that the policies are adequate; I'm not as sure about the implementation. As I mentioned, I think educators could use some professional development around implementing IEP's and ALP's. This doesn't have to be a super expensive proposition. There are teachers

who excel in these areas who can teach their colleagues. District leadership certainly needs to support children and families in making sure these legally binding plans are adhered to.

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

Again, this is a need for all children. We have GT kids, disabled kids, traumatized kids, all kinds of kids who were very challenged by the interruption of the pandemic. This is one of the reasons I support doing whatever it takes to keep kids safely in class without interruption. I do recognize that kids with sensory issues may not be able to mask, but if the rest of the population is doing it for as long as Jeffco Public Health advises, students should have reasonable protection. If we can keep this year as steady and routine as possible, everyone will benefit. The district has been working closely with Jeffco Mental Health. I would encourage us to continue doing so. Community resources will be invaluable in meeting the needs of all our students.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

Well, this will sound a bit like a broken record, but making sure that all teachers are fully trained in the implementation of ALP's and IEP's would go a long way toward this. There are a number of elements of education that teachers attend trainings on at the beginning and throughout the year. The board can require that this become one of them.

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Theresa Domenico Shelton

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

As the mom of three Jeffco students who are attending school a decade part, I have a unique background in Jeffco schools. When our son went through Jeffco a little over a decade ago, supports for gifted students were not as robust as they are today. We now have twin 6th graders, each of whom were identified as gifted and talented (GT) through a different process. One through the second grade CogAT and other assessments and the other through the full body of evidence, a pathway I learned about only as a result of attending a JAGC meeting (a huge shout out and thank you!). Our choice has been to support our daughters in our neighborhood school and now at a Jeffco option middle school.

I agree that Jeffco provides a broad array of supports and options for students who are identified gifted. I support equitable funding for our gifted students and recognize the importance of having some certified gifted teachers and a balance of centers as well as expertise in neighborhood schools. I support ensuring there is funding for gifted resources and training available for all those who wish to better support gifted students. The only policy conversation I have heard so far is the possibility of assessing in kindergarten instead of waiting until 2nd grade. I am open to that or any other conversation that would bring forward needs to best support our GT students. I know from my extensive governing background that simply asking questions from the board table can bring the attention needed to ensure success.

And as noted above, I absolutely appreciate the work of JAGC and the resources provided and know so many other parents who do as well; it is my go to source for tools and encouragement. JAGC connections have provided a level of confidence knowing I am not alone in parenting a gifted student.

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

I believe teachers who are teaching in our center programs should have a gifted certification (or be willing to get one within a short period of time of taking a position in a gifted center). I would also love to see at least one administrator in each gifted center and one teacher in each school have a gifted certification, but it's possible that may be a way off. I would hope all teachers and administrators would spend a meaningful percentage of their professional development time learning techniques for working with GT students. I'd like to see similar certification and professional development guidelines for all who work with special needs learners. Now more than ever it is important for all teachers and staff to be able to differentiate their teaching and practices to meet students where they are today.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

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I will support both robust GT center programs and the availability of appropriate resources in all other schools so parents can decide which learning environment best meets the needs of their students. I will continue to ask if we are allocating the resources needed to support our GT learners and to differentiate instruction providing safe environments for our GT students. I will also seek to ensure all schools have access to the resources they need to meet the goals, expectations and plans of ALPs and IEPs.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

As a board member I will continue to advocate that students get the resources they need to be successful and thrive. We know over the last couple of years our growth scores have declined significantly. In 2019 the last time growth numbers were released only our students who identify as GT or Asian learned more than their peers around the state. This is a serious problem for our twice exceptional students, in fact for all Jeffco students. It says students around the state are learning more in a year than those in Jeffco.

So, no I don't believe Jeffco is adequately addressing student challenges. I am not sure it is a policy issue. My learning seems to indicate it is a "not following policy and not focusing on the problem" issue. Having spent 35 years as a CPA I look forward to focusing on digging in and determining how resources are being allocated and make the changes necessary to improve opportunities for students.

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

While I appreciate the work of the district's Social Emotional Learning Specialists, their focus has been on implementing prevention strategies to support good mental wellbeing. We know from Children's Hospital declaring a Youth Mental Health Emergency, that many children are already in crisis. The board needs to evaluate how the resources we spend supporting mental wellbeing are allocated and ensure in addition to preventative supports we provide supports to those in crisis and those who are recovering from crisis and ready to return to school. We also need to ensure we maintain partnerships with organizations whose mission is to support those with mental health needs, so the school district is appropriately referring students and staff who need more intense support than what can be provided in the district.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

One area of concern that has been brought to my attention is the lack of mandatory screening for GT students who are in kindergarten and first grades. With a universal CogAT not being given until 2nd grade, I have heard some express dismay that a GT student might miss three years of supports. I also have a couple of friends that are new to Jeffco having transferred into the district from other parts of Colorado. While they were excited to be able to bring the body of evidence for their students to receive GT supports, they were disappointed in how long that process took at the time. The third area of concern I have heard (although not recently) is the availability of slots in GT Center programs. I had heard some complaints that parents were offered spots in GT center programs but not at the school that was closest to their homes. I look forward to digging into these issues to help ensure our gifted learners have the supports they need to be successful.

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Danielle Varda

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

All students identified as gifted should have the opportunity for support in the district, in the same ways we provide support and resources for kids with other special talents and needs. While I have little experience with the programs, I know many parents whose children are served by these programs in Jeffco. There is a general sense that more resources and supports could be available, that teachers could have additional professional development early on, and that it is difficult to make decisions to stay in schools without specific GT programs (adding the need to move schools).

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

It seems that the three big questions for administrators and teachers regarding gifted learners are: How to define them, how to identify them and how best to serve them. This is not only a concern for Jeffco but across the nation. Jeffco offers ways for parents to advocate for their children and provides assessments, and I have been aware of when a teacher believes a child is a gifted learner they may reach out to the parent to notify. Like most plans to support children, it requires a collaboration between parents, teachers, and administrators. I believe that our teachers and administrators have the kids' best interests at heart and are willing to become skilled understanding, identifying, and supported gifted learners.

There is almost no greater need at the moment than to attend to the social and emotional needs of all students right now. Kids are struggling in this area across the board. This can be especially challenging for gifted and talented students, and all special needs learners. We need to destigmatize these needs and continue to support kids across the board in this way.

One of my concerns is the underrepresentation of minority and free-reduced lunch students in gifted programs. I would support testing all children, rather than relying on nominations, to increase the chances of all students who need these supports be identified and nurtured.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

I believe that the programs in place in Jeffco that are specifically geared to gifted and talented learners provides environments of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration. It can be a challenge to provide these kinds of additional learning environments inside traditional classroom, when GT students are assimilated into these classrooms.

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However, I believe that all Jeffco classroom should provide an environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration so my hope is that our GT students will feel at ease in any Jeffco

classroom, while getting the additional support and resources they need. This is why it is essential that teachers have the training and ongoing support they need to support GT kids.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

From my experiences to date which are admittedly limited in scope, it appears that Jeffco has adequate policies in place to address twice-exceptional students. However, I would comfortably assume that this does not mean that we have all of the resources and supports that we need to successfully support twice exceptional kids, which is often linked to opportunities for improved policies. So this would be an area I would look into with more depth as a board member.

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

As a researcher on the topic of adolescent mental health, I am a huge advocate for more mental health resources in the school, likely resourced by a great deal of partnerships with the community. I believe that we need to make this a top priority, because mentally healthy kids grow into mentally healthy adults. The gifted learners are especially susceptible to issues around mental health and wellness. As a board member, I will present the district to provide more district level resources to our schools, and will ask that schools make this a #1 priority. I would like to see additional training and support for teachers and staff to know how to address these topics for all learners, including the gifted learners.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

As the Chair of our School Accountability Committee, we review the budget priorities every year. Some years, we have parents of gifted learners participating who are able to advocate for their kids, often citing a lack of sufficient resources. However, I do not know how systemic these issues are for gifted learners in the district. So to answer this question, first I would talk to parents about what needs are not being met, then I would collaborate with the staff and teachers to better understand the constraints and opportunities for improving supports for gifted learners.

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Jeff Wilhite

1. What is your background and philosophy regarding the implementation of support for Gifted and Talented Students in Jeffco Public Schools (via policy, funding, training, resources, staffing, communication, etc.)?

I started my career as a mental health therapist and know how important it is that gifted children have the supports they need to thrive. We also experienced this in our family as one of my children was gifted but not identified until late in the academic journey. Because of my family's experiences I want to make sure every student is identified and gets the support they need. I applaud Jeffco for expanding identification paths and appreciate that more students are receiving the supports they need.

Being a good steward of all Jeffco's resources is my guiding philosophy. That means ensuring that the money we spend, the resources we allocate, and the utilization of talents should all be directed to improving opportunities for students. Our policies should support the goals the board sets, and resources should be aligned. Our staff should get the training they require to meet the needs of their students and should partner with parents and families to develop plans to support students needs. This is especially true for our gifted students to ensure they are inspired to learn achieve their potential.

2. Gifted learners have accelerated and complex intellectual development, often also leading to unique social and emotional needs. For gifted students to develop their potential, the school community must be capable of providing appropriate support. What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be of administrators and teachers to recognize and meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of GT students? What do you believe the professional requirement(s) should be for administrators and teachers in order to recognize and meet the academic, social and emotional needs of Gifted and Talented Students and all special needs learners?

We learned what happens when a school does not have the staff trained to work with gifted students. Most parents not knowing what their child needs change schools in an attempt to find the supports their gifted child needs. I appreciate that Jeffco now does universal screening in 2nd grade and that there are gifted center programs and gifted resource specialists that support staff and students whose families decide staying at their neighborhood school is best for their family. I support requirements that all teachers in the gifted center programs should be working on or have gifted certifications. I also support at least one person on the counseling and support staff also have training in handling the needs of gifted students. I support the trainings offered to teachers and administrators, so all staff are trained to recognize and meet the needs of gifted and talented students. The ability to deliver differentiated learning and supports not only helps gifted students, it also helps other students as well.

3. The National Association for Gifted and Talented Children (NAGC) notes that a learning environment of intellectual safety, trust, and self-exploration is very important for gifted and talented students. As a school board member, how will you ensure a learning environment where each GT student can feel comfortable exploring his or her creative and intellectual differences?

Once our child connected to other gifted students life changed significantly for the better. We learned how important it is for gifted children to be in an environment that celebrates their asynchronous development and supports their social emotional needs. We found when our gifted child was encouraged to excel instead of feeling awkward and being stifled academic achievement skyrocketed as did self-confidence.

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We experienced just how important it is for gifted students to be in an environment where they are supported. As a board member I will support continuing to offer both center programs and supports in neighborhood schools. I will support continued evaluations of capacity so that parents are able to have their children supported in the school and program of their choice.

4. Students who are twice-exceptional, or 2e (gifted with a learning disability), face particular challenges in school. As a school board member, how would you ensure 2e students' strengths are addressed? Do you believe Jeffco's policies adequately address student challenges?

As good stewards we need to be sure all students have the supports they need. I hear frequently from parents with 2e children that they aren't excelling to their potential. I don't know if the challenge is a policy, process, or implementation challenge. I do know it needs to change. As a school board member, I will ask for data to find best practices and for stories to ensure experiences and data match. I will the advocate to make investments in programs that work and as important to me is to stop doing what doesn't work. We can't continue to add to work loads; we need to change where necessary, start what is needed to meet students needs as well as stop doing what doesn't work.

5. The pandemic has exacerbated the mental health needs of all students. Some gifted learners have been particularly affected negatively by the disruption of their normal learning environment. As a board member, how will you ensure these students' mental health needs are addressed?

Children's Hospital declared a State of Emergency for Youth Mental Health as consistently there were not enough beds to handle the needs of youth in Colorado. While I know the mental health system in Colorado was stressed pre COVID, I know the sudden changes that came as a response to COVID hit our youth hard. We know many of the family and neighborhood systems that support our students have been broken or closed. As students have come back to in-person learning discipline issues have increased significantly. We know students are having a tough time readjusting and many trusting relationships have been broken. We also know many students have lost family members or are experiencing hardships at home.

In Jeffco we must have different levels of supports to be sure mental health needs are met. We must have staff trained to identify needs and be able to bring the right level of supports. We are spending millions on mental health supports and need to make sure they are being spent to meet all levels of students needs. One of my top priorities is ensuring Jeffco has 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.

6. In what ways do you believe gifted learner's needs are not being met and what would you, as a school board member, do to change that?

I have already mentioned we need to be sure we are meeting the mental health needs of gifted learners and the needs of our 2e students. I also want to be sure we have the capacity we need in our gifted centers and be sure we are identifying students appropriately and at an early age. As a school board member, I will advocate for our funds to be allocated to the programs that do meet the needs of students. I welcome staying connected to be sure I understand the needs of our gifted learners.

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