

CANDIDATE FORUM**Candidate: Tania Nyman, District 7**

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On Candidate Backgrounds, Roles and Responsibilities of the Board and Education Issues and Needs

1. What do you see as the role of the school board and how has your background prepared you to fulfill this role? Ideally, the school board should be the governing body that represents the community and acts on its behalf in order to fulfill the community's responsibility to provide all children regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or ability with a quality education. There's a myriad of factors that have prepared me to fulfill this role, but the one most relevant is the knowledge I have gained over the past six years volunteering my time to advocate on behalf of our public schools. I first got involved back in 2012 when I joined with other parents to fight against the attempt to create a breakaway school system in the southeastern part of the parish. I worked with other stakeholders to organize Beyond Bricks, a community-led effort to facilitate listening sessions across the parish. And as I and other parents researched the issues, we learned about the threat the proliferation of corporate charter schools poses to public education and to our democracy. I have stayed involved in an effort to raise awareness about these issues, so that we can protect the very premise of public education and fulfill our responsibility to provide a quality education to all children. My perspective is unique and informed and my commitment pure of heart.

2. What are the top two challenges facing public education in our city? The greatest challenge confronting our schools is the concerted effort to privatize our public school system by encouraging the proliferation of charter schools, which are essentially eroding the very premise of public education. I understand that many people supported charter schools with the best of intentions, and indeed the original concept of charter schools was a beautiful idea: parents and teachers would collaborate in order to design curriculum that would more effectively meet the needs of students. And if it worked, they'd take the new approach back to the administration and the school system could implement it in other schools. But that's not what we have now and even the charter schools which are trying to fulfill that original ideal vision are threatened by the state laws and policies that privilege the national and multinational corporate charter chains. Few understand precisely how charters work. A charter school may be designated as a non-profit, but it is required by law to hire a charter management organization. More often than not, the charter management organization is for-profit, and it often has affiliated companies which it enters into business agreements with. These business agreements are not subject to public oversight as they would be if they were with a non-profit or a public institution. The most insidious aspect of these corporate charter chains is their dismantling of voting rights. They do this by diverting the power of our elected board to that of the non-profit board, whose members are appointed not elected and who serve at the pleasure of the for-profit charter management organizations. This diversion of power allows the corporate charter chains to then divert our tax dollars out of our community and to national and multinational corporations.

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This diversion of funds from our traditional public school system is unsustainable. This year our schools will lose \$113 million dollars to charter schools. The proliferation of charters and the subsequent loss of funds are the two greatest challenges confronting our schools. And charters are not improving the overall quality of education. This is why the National Education Association, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Black Lives Matter have all called for a moratorium on the creation of new charter schools.

3. What are two needs that you consider priority for the school board to address?

(a) OPPOSE the creation of a "Portfolio Office" The Baton Rouge Area Chamber and other pro-charter groups are calling for the East Baton Rouge School System to create a "portfolio office" and hire an executive director to oversee the charter schools that operate in East Baton Rouge Parish. There are few other details about this proposal, but it does not appear the executive director would be accountable to a board elected by voters, and it would essentially create a separate school system. This or a similar model has been implemented in Washington DC and has exacerbated inequity. There is no justification for returning to a separate and unequal system in regards to our public schools.

(b) OPPOSE the adoption of a common enrollment system or OneApp. The Baton Rouge Area Chamber and other proponents of charter schools that benefit national and multinational corporations have long been advocating for a common enrollment system, sometimes called OneApp. They claim it will streamline the application process for parents and "increase choice." This is not the primary purpose of OneApp. It's not even one of the results. The primary purpose of OneApp is to guarantee charter operators that an agreed upon number of students will be enrolled in their schools. This in turn guarantees the charter school will receive a certain amount of tax dollars regardless of whether parents chose the school for their children.

Currently, charter schools have to recruit students and parents have to freely choose to enroll their child in the charter school instead of their traditional neighborhood public school. If the OneApp is instituted, parents rank their choices and the software assigns the students to schools. However, there is no guarantee that students will be enrolled in one of the schools chosen by their parents. The OneApp guarantees only that the charter schools will be allocated the promised number of students—and their funding. The funding drain created by the diversion of our tax dollars from our democratically-controlled local school system to the privately operated charter schools sets off a cycle of school closures that further limits' parents' choices rather than increases them. The OneApp is the antithesis of parental choice. It's merely a well-marketed mechanism to eliminate taxpayer oversight by diverting our tax dollars to schools governed by boards whose members are not elected by voters. Don't be fooled by its carefully packaged marketing campaign.

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4. The School Board only has authority as whole. What skills or traits do you possess that will contribute to the effective operation of the board as a whole? It's worth noting that the School Board's authority was curtailed by Act 1 which was passed in 2012 during the Jindal administration. It should be a priority of all in this community that the Board's authority be restored to some degree, and that will require action at the state level. I have a variety of skills and traits that will allow me to contribute to the effective operation of the board. I have spent the last six years researching the issues and volunteering my time advocating on behalf of our public schools.

The knowledge I have gained from that research and work will inform my understanding of matters brought before the board. I also believe that my volunteer work has demonstrated my abiding commitment to public education and to helping my community fulfill its responsibility to provide a quality education to all children regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or ability. I am well prepared to discuss the issues with fellow board members and to negotiate compromises that allow us to fulfill our responsibility.

5. What responsibilities, if any, should school systems assume for addressing societal challenges such as poverty, homelessness, racial disparities and mental health? I believe it is more productive and more accurate to recognize that it is the community's responsibility to address societal challenges such as poverty, homelessness, racial disparities and mental health, and that our school system is one institution at the community's disposal to effectively address these challenges. "Community schools" is one model that we could follow in our schools in order to better meet the needs of students and their family members who are struggling with various challenges. In community schools, the school becomes a site for wrap-around services tailored to the needs of its students and the surrounding neighborhood. The Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools is a good source of information for the benefits of this model.

On Specific Issues of Interest to the Urban Congress on African- American Males, Moms of Black Boys United for Social Change, and The Power Coalition

6. Currently of the 18,000 students sent to alternative education sites, 85% of them are African American and 66% of them are male. What is your opinion on the disparities that exist in our school system's alternative education and discipline practices? I would have to be provided with more information regarding the statistics quoted. As is, the numbers do not indicate there is a disparity. Our school system is approximately 81% African American. If 85% of the students sent to alternative education are African American that would actually suggest it is pretty reflective of the overall make-up of our schools.

7. Do you oppose or support zero tolerance policies that exclude children from the classroom? I oppose zero tolerance policies.

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8. If elected, what specific actions will you take to sport schools and school districts to refocus their resources and energy away from harsh discipline and toward restorative practices to address conflicts? One of my greatest concerns has to do with the state-mandated referral form that every school is expected to use to document a student's "offense." Almost every option on this form appears to require that administrators essentially criminalize typical adolescent behavior. This approach does not offer guidance and support to help students transition to adulthood. Instead it helps facilitate the school to prison pipeline. One specific

thing we can do to improve our approach to discipline is to raise awareness about the implicit bias in the referral form and advocate for changes.

9. Do you support or oppose increasing the presence of law enforcement officers in schools? I oppose increasing the presence of law enforcement officers in schools. I realize that the number of school shootings has everyone understandably concerned about the safety of students and staff. And I appreciate that any decision to assign law enforcement officers to schools is made with the intention of ensuring student safety. However, rather than increasing safety, the presence of law enforcement officers could pose a greater risk to students. Significant steps should be taken to ameliorate such a risk. Some stipulations board members may consider include requiring that any armed personnel be a full-time employee at the school and employed by the school rather than by one of the law enforcement agencies. Such personnel should be required to undergo additional training to enhance their understanding of child development and age-appropriate behavior. And it should be continually reiterated that the primary responsibility of this individual is to ensure the safety of the students and staff in an emergency. He or she should not be involved in enforcing discipline.

10. Do you oppose or support mandatory continuing implicit bias training and de-escalation training for educators and school resource officers? I need more information before I can take a position.

11. If elected, what specific actions will you take to support schools and school districts to provide the trainings necessary to equip teachers to support a diverse student body? I have no specific actions in mind at this time.

12. Support for high quality early childhood is driven by research studies showing that children who participate in such programs can do vastly better in school and in their careers later in life. Do you oppose or support placing a tax proposition on the ballot that would pay for "universal early childhood education" in Baton Rouge from birth to age four? While I wholeheartedly believe in the value of universal early childhood education and hope that one day we can expand our public school system to include pre-kindergarten, I cannot in good conscience advocate for an additional tax as long as our community is at risk of losing the democratic control of its schools. As it stands now, corporate charter schools are eroding the democratic control of our schools in order to siphon our tax dollars out of our community and into national and multinational corporations. Unfortunately, an additional tax for a new program would likely exacerbate the proliferation of these corporate charter schools. This in turn would further destabilize our traditional public school system and set us up for a largely or entirely privatized system. Such a privatized system will eliminate rather than improve the community's ability to address the inequities present in our community.

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13. If elected, what specific actions will you take to ensure "universal early childhood education tax proposition is placed on the ballot? [Please see above.](#)

14. Racism is perhaps the most elusive, penetrating, and permeating challenge in our society. Since racism is an institutional problem, it needs to be solved through institutional change. When we see that our institutions have shown that they can operate in a way that serves the needs of all people equitably it makes it possible to see that racism can be eliminated. Racism was built into our system and anything that was built can be dismantled. We must see to it that our institutions rise to the challenge of solving racism. If elected, would you participate in Dialogue on Race Louisiana's Original Series, an important step in a journey toward enlightenment, understanding and the elimination of racism from our society? [I am an alum of Dialogue on Race. I also serve on the Dialogue on Race Action Committee, but please know that any opinions I express are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Dialogue on Race Action Committee or its sponsoring organization, Dialogue on Race Louisiana.](#)

15. Would you oppose or support a measure to require the school board and key school board system leadership to participate in the Dialogue on Race Original Series? [Assuming I wouldn't be required to abstain from the consideration of such a proposal, I would support a measure to require school board members and school system leadership to participate in the Dialogue on Race Original Series.](#)

16. Do you believe it is necessary to examine the history curriculum to ensure the curriculum is reflective of "the people's history" as expressed by organizations such as the Zinn Education Project? [I am not sufficiently familiar with the People's History nor do I have teaching credentials in this subject matter, so at this time, I cannot take a position on this specific question. I can say that in an ideal world I would wholeheartedly support a review of our history curriculum by stakeholders—teachers and parents—and experts in the field. However, with the current state of affairs, I cannot in good conscience suggest our school system is in a position to advocate for such a review. Our inherently discriminatory school accountability system is targeting our school system for privatization. This accountability system requires students to perform well on standardized tests that are not designed by our local system. Failure to perform well on these tests results in the state takeover and privatization of our schools. If our school system is privatized—chartered, our community will effectively lose the democratic control of its schools. The loss of democratic control eliminates community members' ability to elect meaningful representation to the boards governing their schools. It eliminates their voting rights. If this continues, it will be as it was during Jim Crow, when community members were denied the right to elect their school board members. The first order of business must be to protect this community's voting rights and the democratic control of our schools. Only then can we also genuinely have a say in the curriculum.](#)

17. If elected, would you oppose or support utilization of such educational resources? [Please see response above.](#)

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18. What do you think is the role of the community in school system matters? I believe it is the community's responsibility to provide all children regardless of race, socioeconomic background, or ability with a free and appropriate education. In order to fulfill that responsibility, the community must have the democratic control of its schools.

19. The School Board has a policy that parent and community engagement must be a priority for schools in East Baton Rouge. What are some specific strategies that the board can support schools in the development and implementation of family engagement practices? I need to do more research in this area. As a parent with two children enrolled in East Baton Rouge Parish public schools, I am encouraged to participate in activities in my children's schools in a variety of ways.

20. What, if anything, do you believe the school board and school system, should be doing to address the increasing number of low performing schools in certain parts of our city? This question appears to accept that our current school accountability system—the means by which schools are currently graded and deemed "low performing"—is an accurate measure of school performance. I believe our school accountability system is fundamentally flawed. Currently our state relies primarily if not solely on standardized test scores when calculating school and district performance scores. And yet, standardized tests have a long history of being racially and culturally discriminatory, and student scores generally correspond with parents' education background and family income level. Even the district performance scores in Louisiana reveal a clear correlation between the concentration of poverty in individual districts and the scores assigned to each district. School districts with a high percentage of students living in poverty typically garner low district performance scores while districts with a low percentage of students living in poverty garner high district performance scores. The correlation strongly suggests the standardized test scores reveal less about the quality of the education being offered than they do about the demographics of a school or district. If we want to help "low performing schools," we must first adopt an accountability system that relies on multiple measures to assess our schools and school districts. Then we can determine what additional supports and programs a struggling school needs. What we should never allow is for the state to use the accountability system to justify eliminating a community's voting rights by seizing and chartering schools and districts deemed failing. That, unfortunately, is the case right now, and it needs to be changed.

21. Do you support more local accountability for the use of ESSA funds in producing better education outcomes in struggling schools? More specifically, do you support the school system annually issuing an ESSA Report to the public that shows how ESSA funds were budgeted and spent, what outcomes were achieved with the use of those funds, and the extent to which achievement outcomes did or did not improve for African American males? I don't have a position at this time.

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22. Data shows there are significant disparities in key indicators of student success between African American males and other subgroups. These indicators include elementary and middle school achievement, high school graduation rates, ACT scores, Advanced Placements, TOPS awards, industry-based credentials, and school suspension and expulsions. What can the school system do to address these inequities? I'd have to review the data which shows there are significant disparities in key indicators of student success between African- American males and other subgroups before attempting to respond in detail. However, I think it's worth noting that this question, like a previous one, presumes standardized test scores are a valid measure, in this case, of student performance. That premise should be challenged rather than encouraged. Again, standardized tests are inherently racially and culturally discriminatory. While these tests results can provide some insight into a student's performance, they should never be the sole measure of a student's performance. Unfortunately, in Louisiana they are. This might explain some of the disparities in the key indicators mentioned in the question. The reliance on standardized tests also has a detrimental effect on the quality of the education we can offer in our schools. It distorts the curriculum by placing too much emphasis on test results and, ironically, limits the teachers' ability to tailor material to meet the needs of students, particularly those from marginalized groups. What can our school system do about this? We—local officials and community members—must advocate for changes to our fundamentally flawed school accountability system at the state level.

23. What specifically should our school system be doing to ensure that not only do more African-American males complete high school but that they are connected to postsecondary opportunities? In my opinion, the effort to privatize our public schools is inhibiting our local school system's ability to address these issues. If we really want to ensure more African-American males complete high school, we must advocate for changes to the state accountability system so teachers can have more flexibility in the classroom. (Please see answer to the previous question.) If we want to ensure that African American males are connected to post-secondary opportunities, then our school system can provide some support but ultimately, tuition to those post- secondary opportunities must at least be affordable. TOPS alone does not suffice, and in the absence of affordable tuition, TOPS does more to prohibit non- traditional students from earning a college degree than it does to ensure it. And if we want African-American males inspired to earn a degree or certificate from a post-secondary institution, then we must ensure that the jobs available upon graduation provide a livable wage. There are many rungs on the ladder to success. Education is just one.

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24. Eighty-two percent of EBR students qualify for free and reduced lunch due to their economic status. In a report released by Together Baton Rouge, in 2017, East Baton Rouge Parish sacrificed \$69.6M in property taxes due to Industrial Tax Exemption Programs (ITEP). \$28.1M of this revenue could have been allocated to the East Baton Rouge parish school district. Do you support or oppose ITEP? School systems should be excluded from Industrial Tax Exemption Programs. Industry should not be able to receive an exemption for the share of the property tax owed to the school system.

In all other states with Industrial Tax Exemption Programs, property taxes owed to school systems are effectively excluded from consideration. Louisiana should adopt this practice in order to provide the business community with the predictability it needs to evaluate the merits of any new projects and in order to protect the funding for our school system. School systems are uniquely affected by economic growth and must have sufficient funding to fulfill its mission.

