

Chattanooga Parent's questions for 2008 candidates, Hamilton County Board of Education:

1. What problem(s) would be your top priority?

One of my top priorities will be getting a firm handle on school safety and discipline issues. Incidents of violence and disruption are having a negative impact on the learning environment. We must put the principals and teachers back in charge and make sure the students who want to learn can learn.

Another priority will be increasing academic achievement. As a UTC professor, I know that we recruit more students from the Hamilton County schools than anywhere else; but the number who are taking remedial classes in mathematics and English tells me that our K-12 system can, and must, do a better job of preparing young people to succeed in college and in life.

I also believe our school system has problems with a lack of openness, accountability, and communication with parents and the public. Bad news like school violence is swept under the rug in hopes that no one will notice. There have also been too many "back room" deals resulting in buy-outs and contract extensions for administrators that were approved despite opposition by the majority of citizens.

Finally, there is a need for fiscal responsibility in the school system. Tommy Kranz, system CFO, has told us that successful systems invest at least 90% of their budgets directly in the classroom. Currently, the figure for Hamilton County is about 84%. Clearly our spending priorities are in need of adjustment.

2. What specific steps would you take to begin to address the problem(s)?

Support an increased emphasis on reading, writing, and mathematics as fundamental to the study of any and all subjects.

Insist that resources be reallocated from non-academic areas (such as central office administration) to necessary academic uses such as teacher pay, supplies, and textbooks.

Encourage the superintendent to revisit the procedures for selecting principals to put more emphasis on placing strong leaders in our schools – then empower those leaders to foster a safe learning environment.

Support allocating resources for ISS, alternative school, and any other programs that remove habitually disruptive students from regular classrooms so that students who want to learn can do so.

Adhere to the letter and the spirit of the Sunshine Law. Avoid back-room deals; do the business of the public in public. No accepting trips or other gifts from lobbyists or special interest groups; no traveling on taxpayer funds unless doing so is necessary to job performance.

Respond to communications from parents, teachers, and citizens in a timely and respectful manner. Change the order of business for meetings such that citizens have the opportunity to address the board *before* votes on important matters like policy changes, budget, etc. are taken.

3. Are there specific, newer policies or actions that you feel represent a positive change for Hamilton County schools?

I have seen little in the way of real progress over the last several years. Improvements have been incremental (or in some cases cosmetic) where they have occurred at all. As a UTC professor, I have not seen any evidence that our incoming students from Hamilton County schools are better prepared than they were in the past; if anything, their preparation appears to be trending slightly worse. (For example, the average ACT score for county students dipped last year from 20.0 to 19.8.) Most citizens who spoken with me do not see their children's or grandchildren's schools as improving.

4. Are there specific ones you feel are negative?

I believe the most negative action (not just recent, but it has gotten worse recently) is the apparent informal policy of excluding citizens from any real, meaningful input in the way the Hamilton County schools are run. Several school board members go out of their way to ignore phone calls and e-mails from constituents; the structure of board meetings is set up to inconvenience citizens and discourages them from addressing the board. Contracts are negotiated behind closed doors, unbeknownst not only to the public, but to many of the school board members themselves. Until the *de facto* policies of secrecy and disregard of public opinion are changed, the citizens will have no confidence in any other policies adopted by the school board.

5. Age, occupation, relevant experience, and children's ages and schools, if applicable

I am 47 years old and have lived in Hamilton County for 15 years, ever since accepting a faculty position at UTC in 1993. I hold a bachelor's degree from the University of Southern Mississippi, a master's degree from Mississippi State University, and the Ph.D. in Computer Engineering from the University of Central Florida. I am currently a professor in, and acting head of, UTC's Computer Science and Engineering department. My wife is Chereé Dumas; we were married in 1992. I am stepfather to her two sons, now grown – one is a graduate of MTSU and the other is still a student there; both attended Hamilton County public schools when they were younger. We have two grandsons, ages 4 and 6.