

Mountain Mirror, Interview for August edition

Responses by Joe Dumas

1. Why are you running for a position on the Hamilton County School Board?

I am running for a position on the School Board because education is my profession – something I have dedicated my life to pursuing, and then teaching and mentoring the next generation in its quest for knowledge. As a professor at UTC, I want the students who come into my classroom (more of whom come from the Hamilton County schools than anywhere else) to have the best preparation possible for success in college. (Likewise, I want the students who choose to go directly into the workforce to have the tools needed to succeed there.) I am not satisfied with the progress, or lack thereof, of the county schools under the present School Board. I am of the belief that, rather than sitting on the sidelines and complaining, someone who thinks he can do a better job than those currently in office should step forward and offer himself for the position. So I am doing just that.

2. The monk Thomas Merton once said that the purpose of education is resurrection, or a rising from the dead. What do you think he meant by that? And how would you answer the same question: what is the purpose of education?

The purpose of education, in my view, is to prepare oneself for life. As we go on living, day after day, we should never stop educating ourselves as there is always something new to prepare for.

Regarding resurrection – we all, secretly or openly, wish we could live forever. However, we don't – at least not in the physical world. The only way we can live on in this earth after we are gone is to do something to influence future generations – to leave a legacy that will outlive us. Education is one way to do this. As an educator and scholar, I have in my own pursuits contributed to the body of human knowledge, authoring articles and books that can be referenced by future investigators. But an even more satisfying aspect of my career is that I get to advise and mentor students, preparing them for the future; some of them will go on to positions where they can do the same for the next generation, and so on. In this way my career and life can be resurrected indefinitely into the future, for the good of people I will never meet.

3. What professional and personal experience do you have that qualifies you to become a member of a voting body that determines much of the outcome of public education in our communities?

I think my professional and personal experience not only qualifies me for a position on the School Board – it is essentially a perfect fit for the job. As a university professor, I know what students need in the way of preparation at the K-12 level to succeed in my classroom, and those of my colleagues at UTC and other institutions. And, as a professional with advanced degrees in electrical and computer engineering, I am a natural problem-solver. I am used to gathering facts, analyzing data, and coming up with practical, workable solutions to real-world problems. I think that *modus operandi* is exactly what our school board needs at this time that is so critical to Hamilton County's future.

4. A growing number of Americans, many from younger generations, place great importance on social issues like the environment, poverty and conflict resolution. How do the District 2 schools address these issues in the classroom?

The District 2 schools address these issues in a variety of ways – some of them beyond my current knowledge of the particulars. And there is nothing at all wrong with schools taking on the issues of the day; indeed, that is a major component of education at any level. My concern is that our schools may be spending so much time addressing social issues like the ones mentioned above that we are paying insufficient attention to providing students with a solid foundation in the areas of reading, writing, mathematics, history, science, etc. In my experience, if a student cannot read, write, nor do math effectively, he or she will be severely challenged in making progress toward solving any social problems. Many of our students are not fully prepared in these core areas, as evidenced by the recent decline in county-wide ACT scores. Therefore as a school board member I will emphasize core academic subjects first and foremost, addressing social and other issues once the fundamentals are thoroughly mastered.

5. Do you read poetry? If so, who? And why?

Unfortunately, due to my busy schedule I don't get to read for pleasure as much as I used to. When I do, it is usually fiction or non-fiction prose rather than poetry. For what it's worth, my favorite novel is Stephen King's *The Stand*.

6. Many citizens on Signal Mountain feel that the building of the new middle and high school was motivated mainly by a push for development and not for educational reasons. Do you agree or disagree?

Certainly many, probably most, of the people who supported the construction of a high school on Signal Mountain were sincere in their desire to have a school for educational reasons. However, I do not think it is a coincidence that many of the foremost proponents of the bond issue and tax increase for the new school were developers, real estate brokers, and their close associates who stood to benefit financially from the school and the installation of sewers and other infrastructure associated with school construction. (Please note that I never opposed the building of the school *per se*; however, I vigorously objected to Signal Mountain and Walden's Town funds being used to build a county school, and I am committed to seeing that outstanding debt paid off as soon as possible.) In fact, some of the highest-profile "Friends of Signal Mountain High School" will *still* be sending their own children to private schools after the new school opens. I believe that intelligent readers can draw their own conclusions given the events of the past several years in hindsight.

7. Only two years into a four-year contract, superintendent Jim Scales just had his contract renewed. Why?

There is no good, defensible reason – this explains why 88% of the respondents to a recent chattanooga.com poll opposed the extension. Obviously Dr. Scales wanted his contract renewed while he knew he still had the five votes necessary to get it approved. Once new board members take office, it might not be so easy to convince them that an extension was warranted based on the superintendent's performance. (Personally, I would have liked two years on the board, in addition to the past two years as a member of the public, to see him in action.) The fact that Mr. Conner, the attorney who prepared the contract extension at Dr.

Scales' request, was also one of the school board members who voted to approve the contract, seems not to have bothered Dr. Scales or my opponent (who supported the extension) in the least. However, I see it as a clear conflict of interest – one that, should the matter be litigated, could very well invalidate the contract.

8. In 1993, Red Bank High was designated a National School of Excellence. Last year, it was placed on the state's list of high priority schools, a classification given to failing and troubled schools. Since Red Bank High is within District 2, how do you explain such a drastic and frustrating descent? What are you doing or plan to do to return Red Bank to its former status?

Red Bank High School has been decaying for the last decade, mainly due to neglect. While my opponent has put much time and effort into obtaining a new school for Signal Mountain, he (and most of the other Board members) has paid scant attention to the rest of the district – including Red Bank High School. I plan to meet regularly with Red Bank faculty and parents to solicit their input on how to improve conditions and achievement there. One reason for optimism is the new Red Bank Middle School (soon to be built), which should serve as a much-improved “feeder” school.

RBHS has also been suffering from changes in the makeup of its student body. In recent years, it has become less of a community school and more of a “commuter” school, with students being bused in from areas that are not traditionally part of the Red Bank school zone. I would like to see Red Bank, as well as many other county schools, return to more of a community school paradigm. Not only should this improve community involvement with, and support of, the school, but shorter bus routes will also help save on transportation expenses. With diesel fuel at \$4.75 per gallon and climbing, that is an important consideration.

9. What is the greatest challenge facing the new middle-high school on Signal Mountain? What is its greatest blessing?

Its greatest blessings are a brand-new facility and a great cadre of involved parents. Its greatest challenge is going to be resisting the development of an insular, mountain-centered mentality in its students and parents. While no one liked busing students down and back up the mountain (or, even scarier, allowing brand-new drivers to take themselves down hilly, curvy roads to school in the valley), one good feature of the “old days” was that high school students were forced to find out first-hand what life beyond the mountain was like. They met people they *hadn't* gone to school with for the past nine years, made more (and more diverse) friends, and broadened their horizons. I hope that those who choose a complete K-12 education on the mountain won't miss out on off-mountain life experiences.

10. Finally, who or what is the greatest teacher in your life?

I have had many excellent teachers at the elementary, middle, and high school levels and in college (in the course of earning three degrees) – too many to name them all here. However, my greatest teachers were my parents, Mary and Joseph Dumas, Sr. They raised me to value education and to put my full effort into everything I do, never settling for less than my best. They put me on the path to success in life and they will have my eternal gratitude and love for the great foundation they gave me and my two sisters.