

2023 Candidate Questionnaire

Office: Los Alamos Public Schools, School Board

NAME: Lauren Coupland

DISTRICT NUMBER: 3

General Candidate Information:

1. Do (Did) your children attend public schools? Which schools do (did) they attend?

Yes, I have a 3rd grader and a 6th grader at Aspen Elementary. They also both attended Los Alamos Online Learning Academy, and my youngest went to preschool PK3 and PK4) at Barranca Elementary.

2. Do you or have you ever been part of a labor union? Spouse/Family? If so, when and which union?

When I taught at The Bridge Alternative High School in Brighton Michigan, I was heavily involved in conversations about either joining the Brighton Area Schools Union, or forming one unique to the Alternative High School. It was a challenge considering the way that the school was set up, and I moved to New Mexico while it was still being discussed.

My husband Dan Coupland was also a member of the Michigan State University Graduate Student Union.

Overview on Education in Los Alamos

1. What is the estimated student population in the District?

a. Total population: 3,724

b. K-12: 3,552

c. Pre-K: 172

These were the numbers from last school year. We haven't yet hit the fortieth day of school for the new totals, but I do know that this year's enrollment for preK is the highest that it has ever been.

2. What can you do as a Board Member to ensure a quality education to all school-aged students in Los Alamos from early education through Secondary Ed.?

We need to ensure that best practices are consistent throughout the schools. Pilot programs that prove effective should be implemented district-wide. We can learn from each other. At Mountain, teachers have dedicated time, ahead of the school year, to collectively discuss students with IEPs and plan for consistent implementation that will support each student. At Aspen, parents are invited to list their child's strengths and weaknesses and this information is leveraged to help match students with teachers in the next grade. These are student-focused policies that empower teachers. Sharing strategies across schools will help ensure 100% student success.

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Student Education, Policies, Support, and Safety

1. How do you plan to support the education and safety of students, of any background, gender, ethnicity, social group, or identity?

As a disabled, Jewish woman, I understand what it feels like to not be included. I know first hand what it's like to be an after-thought. I want to ensure that no child—that no member of our community—is ever an afterthought.

Accessibility must be planned into any event. It needs to be considered from the very start and is the foundation of inclusivity. From physical accessibility to cultural inclusivity, we can support the education and safety of all of our students by identifying and dismantling barriers to entry. Last year, we finally implemented a multicultural calendar for the schools after serving on the equity council. I championed this effort for seven years. Something as easy as scheduling school events around culturally significant days has a huge impact on students feeling safe, supported, and included.

My aim is always to bring more people to the table. The easiest way to make room at the table is to seek out and hear those missing voices. I have met with indigenous students, at their invitation, and discussed the problems that they're facing, with an aim to find solutions. I have supported trans and LGBTQIA+ students by advocating for their equity, as well as championing institutional changes to ensure their safety and inclusion.

I would love to bring more voices to the table by inviting student leaders from marginalized groups that can help us better advocate for them. I also believe in encouraging good citizenship and recognizing strong advocates, rather than only punishing discrimination. If we can model and highlight inclusivity, Los Alamos will be better equipped to manage its problems with discrimination.

2. Federal Laws, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, and Free Appropriate Public Education, are designed to protect students.

a. How familiar are you with these laws and how they are implemented?

I am very familiar with IDEA and the ADA. I have been disabled for all of my life, and the protections enshrined in IDEA and ADA are something I have always had to fight for. I learned terms like LRE and FAPE as a student attending my own IEP meetings. My mother was a strong advocate, and instilled in me the importance of knowing the law, your rights, and never accepting less. As a college student, I had to advocate on my own for ADA accommodations, and had classes in Special Education as part of my teacher training program. As a teacher, I attended IEP meetings and advocated for my own students. As a parent, I have advocated for my own children from ISFP to IEPs for 10 years, as well as facilitated PRO trainings in Los Alamos, and coached other parents through the IEP Process.

b. Are you familiar with their funding?

Neither the ADA or IDEA have ever been fully funded. New Mexico distributes federal funding per student based on the level of support needed. When the board is crafting legislative priorities, we should push for IDEA to be *closer* to fully funded. Specifically, we must advocate for the state to provide grants to upgrade infrastructure for ADA compliance.

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c. How do you plan to ensure these laws are being followed and their funding is being implemented properly?

From the top-down, we must ensure that staff stays up-to-date on the newest recommendations and requirements, as well as best practices to implement IDEA laws. District leadership must stay up-to-date on PED guidance manuals. We must prioritize teachers and ensure they have the proper time and support to make modifications and accommodations to their lessons.

Parent education and advocacy organizations, such as Parents Reaching Out, are federally mandated. We should encourage and facilitate parent training and education through these programs so that parents can effectively support teachers in IEP planning and implementation.

I have reviewed the IDEA part B application submitted by the district. I am actively studying this to ensure funding for services is implemented appropriately.

3. Recently, Los Alamos Public Schools implemented the program Safe and Civil Schools. How familiar are you with this program? What is your view on this approach?

Safe and Civil Schools is a good model for consistent and clear expectations, procedures, and data collection. Where it can fall short is understanding the nuances of individual student behavior. All behavior is communication and this program may overlook the underlying causes of undesirable behavior. We must ensure that we implement trauma-informed practices that capture the needs driving those communications.

4. The safety of students is not only a priority for the District but also for the Union. What, in your opinion, defines student safety? How do you plan to support safety in our schools?

Students at school must be safe physically and emotionally. School should always be a safe place, especially for those children that lack other safe spaces. I support the additions of fencing and cameras that have been added for physical safety.

I appreciate efforts to move schools towards single-point-of-entry and multi-exit facilities. Requiring identification and comprehensive records of who is in the building and why are simple, cost-effective measures that support student and staff safety.

When I taught at the Alternative highschool, we had an active shooter threat. I acutely remember discussing with my class about whether the procedures we had in place were sufficient to keep them safe. My students talked about paths to escape and anticipated avenues for potential harm. It still haunts me.

We must do everything in our power to ensure that our students and staff are safe and feel safe when they are at school.

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5. New positions are created almost every year.

a. How will you ensure these new positions truly support students and their education needs?

New positions must have clearly defined responsibilities and expectations. When a task is considered a shared responsibility, it often falls through the cracks. By clearly delineating roles and eliminating redundancy, we can be more effective and efficient. Teachers are constantly having more added to their plates. Any new role must take on those responsibilities and relieve the burden of administrative tasks that do not directly serve the student.

b. How will you ensure these positions do not strain the budget?

I strongly believe that there is always room in the budget for people. I will always prioritize the proper compensation of our teachers and staff. I am committed to actively seeking out additional grants and community partnership opportunities to optimize funding for upgrading our infrastructure and relieving any strain that would affect teachers and staff. The development of the new multi-use gym at the middle school is a great example of using alternative funding sources to maximize the school district's budget.

Educator Support, Wellness, and Recognition

1. Over the years, Certified Educators have been required to take on additional duties. From increased paperwork to more committees, the workload has overwhelmed many of our educators. What plans do you have to address the extra demands that have been placed on our educators?

We need to reduce unnecessary reporting and trust teachers to do their jobs. Our teachers are professionals and we don't need to micromanage them. Eliminating these menial tasks will relieve a lot of unnecessary demands.

2. Instructional Assistants are a crucial part of the education system. They support the educator through basic clerical needs, supporting the curriculum given to students, delivering enrichment to students, and ensuring the safety of our students in and out of the classroom.

a. How do you plan to support our Instructional Assistants?

IAs/EAs are often used as a stop gap to plug holes in institutional problems. We need to respect the work they do and protect their placement in the roles they were hired for. We cannot treat them like unskilled volunteers.

b. How do you plan to work with Administrators to make sure they are being used effectively?

We need to make sure the important work of the IAs is not drowned out by subbing, supporting lunch, or other foreseeable staffing needs. EAs cannot be treated as the solution to every problem in the school's system. Administrators need to find other solutions, like dedicated building substitutes, to ensure that IAs can focus on their assigned responsibilities.

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3. Professional Development is critical for all Educators, in the classroom and out of the classroom. Professional Development comes in many forms from training, conferences, classes, etc. How do you plan to work with Administrators to make sure they are being used effectively?

Good professional development helps teachers to be at the top of their game and best support our students. However, professional development just for professional development's sake often feels perfunctory and takes away productive time that could otherwise support classroom needs. Teacher-directed professional development opportunities, such as the Summer Learning Institute, are much more effective. I hope to enable teachers to pursue their own professional development interests and facilitate opportunities that will allow our teachers to pursue their individual interests. I am a staunch supporter of research-based strategies and pushing forward. I want to support teachers in bringing the latest educational research and best practices back home to Los Alamos.

4. District Office, Maintenance, Transportation, and Custodial staff are often feel overlooked in the district because they are not utilized in the classroom.

a. What role do you feel they play in Student Education?

Transportation are some of the most undersupported staff members in our district, with one of the most impactful responsibilities. School buses are the least supervised places in our district. Bus drivers are responsible for safety and ensuring that every student arrives and goes home safely, all while navigating unpredictable traffic and unpredictable kids. When we have a shortage of drivers, routes become overcrowded and transportation is delayed, cutting into instructional time.

Maintenance and custodial staff help create the learning environment and ensure the school environment is conducive to learning. They ensure that teachers and staff have the tools they need to support our children.

The district office is our ultimate backbone of support. Most people only consider the district office when something goes wrong. It's the customer service role of our school district. They help with procurement, technology issues, and ensure staff and parents stay informed. They guarantee that the district meets its legal responsibilities. They're who students, staff, and parents depend on when support is needed beyond the school.

b. How do you plan to recognize them and their contributions?

Currently, we recognize these important roles at board meetings during set recognition weeks. However, that recognition should be backed up to better honor their many contributions.

- Include in staff appreciation such as lunches
- Recognize on district social media alongside teachers
- Open applications for "Outstanding X of the Year" based on student, teacher, and parent nominations
- Ensure these positions are fully-staffed and fairly compensated

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5. Certified Educators are required to teach to standards set forth by the State and Federal Governments. How much teacher autonomy do you feel is appropriate for our educators to have when teaching to these standards?

Diversity of knowledge is essential for a functioning society. Scripted curriculum (like the new ELA curriculum) has a place, and can certainly be helpful for early career teachers, or staff taking on new subjects or classes. But, we should allow our established teachers to tailor their lessons to best reach the students in their classrooms. We should require foundational best practices, like the science of reading, while allowing for content diversity.

The entirety of human knowledge is too vast to cover completely. When students and teachers are allowed to select books and topics (within the state standards), we make school more interesting and better engage students. With a consistent core/base, but freedom to go more in depth in different areas, students can gain deeper understanding and have probing discussions.

The Southwest Literature class developed by our high school English department is an excellent example of allowing teachers to establish their own curricula. It allows for choice and specialization that ensures minority voices become part of our cultural knowledge base.

Board Duties and Responsibilities

1. Los Alamos Public Schools receives funds from the Local, State, and National levels. How familiar are you with the funds we receive?

I started a deep dive into school funding when I was on the calendar committee last year. School funding has changed greatly in the past decades, and has moved towards a more equitable, distributed model. This is the area that I feel I have the least knowledge base. I look forward to continued learning in this area.

2. Do you have any background with a multi-million dollar budget?

I have not worked with multi-million dollar budgets, but I have stewarded programs operating on several thousand dollar budgets. I serve on the Life and Legacy Endowment committee at the Los Alamos Jewish Center. I have additional experience with smaller budgets, like supporting Aspen PTO events and fundraising, as well as projects, like overseeing textbook selection and purchasing at Brighton.

3. What priorities or values do you think the budget should reflect?

I believe that our budget should prioritize evidence-based quality intervention and special education. I think it's also important to prioritize more teacher support. We need concrete support for new teachers undergoing alternative licensure that does not add burdens to more senior teachers. We need to enable staffing levels that will reduce case loads so that teachers and students can get more in-depth support for special education.

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4. 2020 showed us that disasters can come at any time. It showed how unprepared we were as a country and as a district. How will you help ensure we as a district are prepared for issues or disasters that could take place?

Our town has seen its share of disasters, from Cerro Grande to Las Conchas to Cerro Pelado, as well as COVID. We have learned that school doesn't always look the same, but we can rally around our students and teachers to ensure they still get the support they need in times of crisis. Having one-to-one technology allows us to pivot as needed. We also have access to a wealth of experts in a variety of fields in Los Alamos that can help us make evidence-based decisions. We can also trust our teachers and staff to know best what our students need. Getting each student what they need is more important than getting each student the same thing. I will ensure the board hears those expert voices and I will amplify the expertise of our teachers and staff.

We need to anticipate potential problems and make plans and develop guidelines before tragedy strikes. I would love to oversee the development of strategic plans for a variety of potential crises, like public health issues, long-term power or internet outages, wildfire, and infrastructure failure. We can anticipate worst case scenarios and have plans in place ahead of time to best support our community during times of upheaval.

5. The School Board creates policies that the district must follow. How familiar are you with the creation of policies?

Currently, Carter Payne is taking the lead on rewriting board policy. The new policies must reflect the strategic plan and priorities of the district. The policies must also be checked against applicable laws. Proposed policies are presented to the board for a first read, where the board and the public can ask questions and make comments. Then, the proposed policies can come back for a second or more read(s). Ultimately, the policies are added to the consent agenda, voted on as a whole or as individual policies. Each policy is required to be reviewed annually.

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6. How familiar are you with the implications they have at the classroom and site levels?

Policies are the framework for our district. Policy governs the rules, procedures, and conduct of students, staff, and administrators, from guiding dress, speech, and electronics, to protections for minority groups. However, policies and their implementation can often be unclear and even contradictory.

I believe that a lot of policies are not necessary. Board policy can often move too slowly for meaningful impact at the classroom and site levels. Many policies *can* be implemented at the district level, like legal requirements, protections, procedures, and overarching guidelines. But, policies regarding electronic usage, backpacks, or the like, are better handled at the school level.

We can trust individual schools and teachers to develop and implement their own policies. In fact, poorly understood and poorly enforced district policies only serve to undermine trust in our teachers and staff. Just this year, the renewed enforcement of the long-standing electronic device policy has led to widespread confusion and frustration—all targeted at our teachers on the front lines. Even though the policy was already on the books, the lack of consistent enforcement resulted in parents and students feeling surprised, singled out, and ultimately undercut teachers who were left with the challenge of enforcement and spreading awareness about the change.

7. What policies do you hope to create, remove, or change while you serve on the board?

I hope to thoroughly review all school board policies, particularly those restricting freedom of expression. In 2020 and 2021, I strongly advocated against further restrictions on the employee speech policy. Teachers have valuable insights and perspectives that should not be silenced to prop up a perfect image for the district. Teachers have lives, roles, and feelings outside of their teaching responsibilities. I want to strip back those restrictions on teacher's speech so that our community can benefit from our educators' insights. I brought this policy change to the attention of the Teacher's Union in 2020/2021 and we fought back a lot of the restrictions, but there's still more that can be done. Teachers must be free to vent, to reach out for advice, and to share their experiences as parents and community members without concern for retaliation or censure.

I will also continue advocating for more equitable policies, like implementing the multicultural calendar. I first began advocating for a multicultural calendar and policy seven years ago, when my oldest started kindergarten. Through collaboration with district administration and the district Equity Council, we finally have a multicultural calendar available on the district website that *could* protect student and staff participation in their religion and/or culture. The calendar remains underutilized, but will be a major support for ensuring activities and academics are scheduled equitably and inclusively. I strongly support adopting policy that will further support the multicultural calendar and its use, so that no student or teacher must choose between participating in their culture or religion and a school activity.